

Vera Dreezo

Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Oksana Kuntsevskaya

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Vera Dreezo is a very nice and friendly small woman. She looks good for her age of 74 years. She lives in a house built in 1980s at quite a distance from the center of Kiev. She lives in a two-room apartment that was recently renovated. Hers is a nice apartment. She has photographs on the walls. Many of them are of her theatrical work. Vera does shopping and cleans her apartment herself. She has a caring son and daughter-in-law and a grown up granddaughter that often come to see her. They live nearby. Vera tries to take care of her everyday chores, but when she has problems her son is there to resolve them. Besides, Vera has many acquaintances and friends. She leads an active life.



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My family background

My maternal great grandfather's name was Ghenad Bairach. I don't know his year of birth or death. He was a cantonist [1](#). My great grandfather served 25 years in the tsarist army and was given permission to settle down in Kiev regardless the existing restrictions about the Pale of Settlement [2](#). This permission spread on his heirs as well. My great grandfather lived in Mokraya Street Solomenka [at present this is one of central districts, but at his time it was in the outskirts of Kiev]. He had a house, but I don't know whether he bought it or built it for himself. My mother told me that my great grandfather was an extremely strong man. My mother told me that when Denikin troops [3](#) came to Kiev in 1917 his son-in-law Iosif Mikhailovski took his three daughters to the house of Ghenad Bairach. Someone reported to Denikin troops where the girls were hiding and Denikin soldiers tried to break through the gate. My great grandfather took a horse cart shaft and moved on them. When they saw him they ran away. He was a man of great strength. I don't have information about my great grandmother or how many children they had.

My maternal grandmother's name was Dvoira Mikhailovskaya, nee Bairach. I was given the name of Vera after her. Our names sound alike. I don't know when my grandmother was born, when she married Iosif Mikhailovski or whether she had any education. I don't know where she came from or who were her parents came from. My mother told me that before the Revolution [4](#) her father Iosif Mikhailovski was selling hay and had horses for transportation purposes. He was a wealthy man, but of course, after the Revolution and Civil War [5](#) Soviet authorities expropriated his horses.

After my grandmother and grandfather got married they lived in my grandfather's house in Solomenka near where my great grandfather lived. The first floor was made of stone and the second floor was wooden, but plastered. I've been in this house. I remember us climbing squeaking stairs with handrails leading to the second floor. There were such small rooms in the house. My grandfather rented out the first floor at the time when I remember before the Great Patriotic War [6](#), and his family lodged on the 2nd floor. Grandmother Dvoira had eight children. Two children died in infancy and one boy died in his teens. I don't know their names. Five children survived: Michael, my mother Ghita, Meyer, Ethel and Lyolia. They are all gone. My grandfather gave education to his children. The boys studied at a realschule in Kiev and the girls studied in a grammar school. By the way, my grandfather paid for his three daughters and for three Christian girls whose parents were poor.

Their family wasn't religious. They spoke Russian and didn't celebrate even the biggest holidays, although I wouldn't be that sure about it. I guess my grandfather's 25-year service played its role. He may have forgotten all rules when he was in the army. My grandmother had a housemaid to help her around the house. Besides, the children had a nanny. My mother told me little about her childhood and her brothers and sisters.

My mother's older brother Michael Mikhailovski, born approximately in 1900 - 1901, finished a realschule [7](#) in Kiev before the revolution and worked as a trade shipments forwarder. Michael didn't have a smooth marital life. He was married three times. His three wives were Jewish. Michael divorced his first and second wives. In his second marriage he had two sons: Boris, born in 1927, and Arkadi, born in 1936. When the Great Patriotic War began Michael was recruited to the army. I don't know where exactly he served. He was awarded two orders of Red Star. Shortly after he returned from the front he got married for a third time. He worked in a supply company in Kiev. Then he resigned. His third wife Fania - all I know about her is her name - and he did housework and counted how many berries they would put in each varenik [dumpling with filling]. Michael took after my grandfather: same appearance and same bad character. He and his wife visited us every now and then. He didn't observe any Jewish traditions and spoke Russian. I didn't keep in touch with his children and cannot say whether they observed any traditions. Michael died of cancer in 1970s. His older son Boris buried his father in their family grave at Berkovtsy [town cemetery in Kiev] and then moved to America with his family. I don't have any information about him. I don't have any information about Michael's younger son.

My mother's middle brother Meyer Mikhailovski, born in 1903, also finished a realschule in Kiev. He was a bachelor. He worked at the 4th shoe factory in Kiev. He went to work there as a worker and was promoted to foreman. Meyer lived in the room where our family lived. When my mother got married she took him from the factory hostel to live with us. On the first days of the Great Patriotic War he was drafted to the army and was awarded two orders of Red Banner. After the Great Patriotic War Meyer returned home and worked at the 4th shoe factory. He helped us to get our

room in the communal apartment [8](#) back after the war. He lived there until he died. Meyer was a devoted and convinced communist. He rejected anything associated with religion. He died some time in 1960s and was buried in Berkovtsy.

My mother's younger sister Ethel Mikhailovskaya, born in 1906, I guess, she studied in a grammar school like her sisters. I have no information about her. Once my mother mentioned that Ethel got married in 1920s and moved somewhere far away. I don't know any details since I never saw her.

My mother's younger sister Lyolia Berezina, nee Mikhailovskaya, born in 1909, finished elementary course of grammar school before 1917 and then studied in a Russian secondary school in Kiev. Her husband Pyotr Berezin was Russian. I don't know what he did for a living. Their son Victor was born in 1931. However, Lyolia's husband turned out to be a drunkard and they divorced. She was ill with spandelite. She often stayed in hospital and there was a common idea in the family that Lyolia was ill and always needed help. She worked at a factory in Kiev. I don't know what she did there. When the Great Patriotic War began Lyolia evacuated with my mother, my sister Zoya and me. My father was responsible for the evacuation of families of employees of refrigeration factory. Besides my mother, Zoya and me he was allowed to arrange for evacuation of one additional person. I can remember well that mother was begging of my father to have Lyolia and her son going with us. This was 21 July 1941. Father was a very honest man. He replied 'If I allow for two more people to evacuate other people will talk that I am making arrangements for my relatives pointing their fingers at me. I just cannot allow it to happen. Lyolia and Vitia will go by next train in two weeks'. What Lyolia did – she left Vitia with his Russian grandmother and joined us. I couldn't forgive her that she had left her own child. Vitia was 10 years old. It took him a long time to adjust to the thought that his mother had left him behind. It was a big shock for him. His grandmother lived with her second son and his family in Solomenka. First somebody reported that there was a 'zhydyonok' [offensive term for a Jewish child] hiding and Gestapo soldiers came for him. He was beaten and taken away and stayed a whole night in a cellar with rats. Next morning this grandmother and her Russian or Ukrainian neighbor ran to the police office where they both screamed him out of his captivity. About ten days later Vitia overheard his uncle's wife saying 'I will report on this zhydyonok anyway!' At that time there were posters ordering Jews to come to the Babi Yar [9](#) all over the town. He left home and through all years of the war he was wandering all over Ukraine, from one house to another. Lyolia recalled him in evacuation. As soon as Kiev was liberated she wrote her mother-in-law asking 'Where is Vitia?' She replied 'I don't know whether he is alive.' Vitia returned to his grandmother after Kiev was liberated in November 1944. We were in Orenburg [today Russia, over 2000 km to the east from Kiev], when we received a letter saying that he was alive. We demanded that he came to Orenburg and then we all returned to Kiev. Victor worked as a tram driver and was married three times. Now he is a pensioner. I went to the Hesed where I got to know that he wasn't on the list of prisoners since he was on the occupied territory. I went to the archives with him and we obtained all necessary documents to confirm that he has a status of a former prisoner. He receives a German pension.

After we returned to Kiev Lyolia went back to work at the factory. She didn't remarry and lived with her son's family. Victor treated his mother coolly. He probably didn't forgive her betrayal of him, but mother is mother. Lyolia spoke Russian and didn't observe any Jewish traditions. She died in 1970s and was buried at Berkovtsy cemetery.

My mother Ghita Mikhailovskaya was born on 18 November 1904. She studied in a grammar school like her sisters. My mother told me that before the revolution they studied Hebrew and, so it seems, Yiddish that she has forgotten in the course of time. I only can't remember whether they had a teacher at home or studied the languages in grammar school.

Grandmother died of typhoid in 1916 when my mother was 12. After she died grandfather married a Russian housemaid. She was a plain woman and had no education. Wealthier Jews used to have non-Jewish housemaids (goy they were called). The name of this housemaid was Tosia. She and grandfather had three children of their own. I have no information about those children.

Tosia worked as a cleaning woman or attendant in a hospital in Kiev after the revolution. I don't know what grandfather was doing after the revolution. He was tall and thin and had a thin face. He was kind and talked to me nicely, but he didn't support us.

I don't know whether my grandfather went to synagogue, but I know that they celebrated Pesach and also Easter with his second wife. I don't know any details, but they celebrated these holidays more likely as a tribute to tradition since they were not religious. My mother and I visited them somewhere in the middle of holidays. I remember that we ate matzah.

After he remarried grandfather stopped supporting his older children. He probably thought they already could take care of themselves. Grandfather was an indomitable man and was interested in political subjects. In 1930s he was charged of Trotskism [10](#) and imprisoned. Later he was released, but I don't know of any details. My mother didn't keep in touch with grandfather and his second family. It seems grandfather died in late 1930s.

My mother and her sisters were having a hard time, especially during the Civil war. My mother couldn't complete her education having to support her younger sisters. She worked at fairs and exhibitions as a cashier or did any work she could get. My mother and her sisters were renting a room. Basically, my mother told me very little about this period of her life. I cannot imagine how they survived these hardships. In 1925 or so my mother began to work as a cashier in a grocery store in the center of Kiev where she met my father.

My father Ilia Minevich (Elia in the Jewish manner) [Common name] [11](#) was born in Mozyr somewhere in Vinnitsa region in 1904. I cannot tell about this town since I've never been there. I know very little about my paternal grandfather – just what my mother told me. My mother said he was a steward in somebody's mansion in Mozyr. This is all I know about my grandfather. I have no information about my paternal grandmother either. My mother also told me that my father had a brother and an older sister. All I know about them is that my father sister's name was Elza and she danced and sang in the gypsy theater in Kiev before the Great Patriotic War. My father brother's name was Iosif. He perished at the front.

My mother told me a short story about my father's childhood. There was a solar eclipse when my father turned nine. He looked at the sun without a special glass and – he got blind. The owner of the mansion where his father was a steward wished to give him money for medical treatment and my grandfather took my father to many doctors until one doctor said that as suddenly as he got blind he would see. This happened to be true: my father began to see a year later.

I don't know what kind of education my father had. In 1920s he went into trade after a Komsomol appeal [12](#). I don't know any details, but in late 1920s he moved to Kiev where he was appointed as director of a food store. This was when he met my mother and fell in love with her. However, by that time my father had been married. His wife was a Jewish girl, a seamstress. They didn't have any children and as the time passed they became different. She remained a provincial girl with hardly any interests while my father was fond of reading, was interested in politics and self education.

My mother didn't want to meet with him since he was married. My mother told me that my father's mother came to Kiev and came to my mother's work to see her. She said: 'Please marry him, he loves you. He will divorce his wife and leave her a sewing machine'. A sewing machine was of incredible value! My father divorced shortly afterward and married my mother in 1928. My mother said they didn't have a wedding, just a civil ceremony in a registry office. Shortly afterward my father became director of a trade center (four stores on a crossing in the center of Kiev). This was an area where all artistic elite resided.

I remember my father very well – he was taller than average and a very handsome man, but what was most important about him was his extraordinary voice. My mother told me a family legend. My father was very kind to his subordinates. Most of them were women and he never hesitated to help them lift something heavy or help with anything. One late night – and stores were open until midnight at that time my father was signing helping shop assistants. There was only one customer in the store at that late hour: he was short, fatty, bold and had a stick... he hit the counter with his stick ordering 'Come out who is singing there!' This was Grigoriy Veryovka [13](#). He was trying to talk my father into going to school to learn to sing 'You'll be singing in the Bolshoi Theater [14](#) two years from today!' My father had a rare baritone bass. He had a very strong voice. He liked signing Ukrainian folk songs, Jewish songs, Russian songs and arias. However, my mother got jealous about his perspectives and my father refused undertaking a career of a singer. Then, when father perished my mother was terribly sorry that she had not allowed him to study singing. He might have survived if he had been an actor.

In 1929 my father received a room in a communal apartment with five other tenants in the center of Kiev. This apartment probably belonged to a rich man before. There was a big kitchen and a bathroom with a big closet shelves inside. The bathroom was used as wood storage – there was stove heating in the apartment before the Great Patriotic War. There were primus stoves [15](#) and later – kerosene stoves and then when gas supply was installed there were two or three gas stoves brought into the kitchen to replace the old stoves. Two families shared one stove. There were arguments about who cleaned the stove and who didn't. Each family had a bulb in the hallway and an electric doorbell. It was bad when one rang a wrong bell or lit a wrong bulb! Tenants also took turns to wash the floor in the hallway. I remember washing the floors in this big hallway when I was in the tenth form after the Great Patriotic War.

Growing up

I was born in this room on 18 November 1929. I didn't go to a nursery school or kindergarten. My mother became a housewife when I was born. One of our neighbors taught my mother to cook since my mother had lost her parents at an early age and didn't know how to do it. She learned to cook gefilte fish, pudding, pancakes and stew. I don't know whether our neighbors were Jewish,

probably because I didn't care. All housewives shared their recipes gladly and cooked dishes of various cuisines in our kitchen: Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish. I learned from her when I grew up. My father hired me a nanny to help mother with the housework. Her name was Varia and she came from a Ukrainian village. At the beginning she slept in the mezzanine closet in the bathroom. There was a ladder to climb there and I used to climb this ladder visiting her there. I liked it there. She had an icon and some other little things there. My nanny got ill before the Great Patriotic War. There were polyp or something identified in her throat. My father gave Varia money to pay for a surgery. Varia loved me and my sister dearly. She never got married. My father helped her to receive a small room near the kitchen in an apartment on the 4th floor of the building where we lived. She died after the Great Patriotic War and we buried her.

In 1937 my younger sister Zoya was born. By that time my father received a bigger room in the same apartment where we lived. There was a big double bed in the room, some low table by an opposite wall and my sister's bed. There was a coach with a high back upholstered with black artificial leather where I slept. There was an oval table beside it. There was a partial to separate a corner for my mother's brother Meyer. There was a small stove. The window of our room faced a backyard where there was a shed and garbage containers.

The most terrible thing about our apartment were huge red rats. They were there before and after the war. We had to stamp our feet to scare away all rats before coming into the hallway. When we returned to this room after the war there were even more rats there. There was an anti-aircraft defense headquarters before and in the first years after the war in the basement of our house. The windows to this basement that were right underneath our window were closed with sheet steel and there was a fire emergency staircase near those windows. The rats ran up and down the staircase, got over this sheet steel to our window tapping on it. This was a terrible life!

In 1938 refrigeration factory #2 was built in Demeyevka [a distant district in Kiev]. It is still there and I buy ice-cream produced there. My father became a commercial director of this factory that same year. I've already told you how the family of the commercial director lived. My mother had two dresses: one made of crepe de chine and one of wool. My father had a suit, a coat and a cap. However, our situation improved a little. My father went to a recreation center a couple of times. His management also promised to give him an apartment since there were five of us living in one room: my father, my mother, two children and my mother's brother Meyer.

My parents were friends with two neighboring Jewish families: the Abramsons and Grabovs. They often got together to play cards, have a drink and chat. Since I was sleeping on the coach in the same room I often overheard their discussions before falling asleep. They talked about arrests [Great Terror (1934-1938)][16](#), but I didn't understand it. I cannot remember by what miracle this period didn't have an impact on our family. They also discussed their family life. Somehow they came to the decision to have another baby almost simultaneously and their younger children were of the same age.

My parents liked going to the cinema, theaters and football matches. They were theater goers and went to theaters with their friends. They went to the Franko Theater [Ukrainian Drama], and discussed how actors were playing, they also went to the Opera Theater and discussed Patorzhynskiy [Ivan Sergejevich Patorzhynskiy (1896 - 1960) - a famous Soviet bass singer], famous Litvinenko-Volgemut [Maria Litvinenko-Volgemut (1892-1966): a famous Soviet opera

singer, lyrical dramatic soprano], of course! I often went to the theater for young spectators. We had many books in Russian by classical and modern writers. My parents were very fond of reading. We were an ordinary Soviet family. A family of a Soviet employee. My parents were convinced atheists and we didn't celebrate any religious holidays.

I went to Russian lower secondary school #48 in 1936. I finished the 4th grade before the Great Patriotic War.

I remember very well that in late 1930s my father went on trips to other Soviet republic on training. Once he brought a recipe for kefir [fermented dairy drink] from the Caucasus and had it introduced in production. This was how production of kefir started in Kiev and nobody can tell me otherwise. It was delicious kefir, so rich! In 1939 my father initiated opening of two ice-cream shops in Kiev. The refrigeration factory began to produce various ice-creams, frozen fruit, juiced berries and ice-cream cakes. This was new experience since before this there were ice-cream stands where a vendor just put ice-cream in waffle scoops. This was my father's idea to make ice-cream shops. There were nice table and stools in these shops where my mother took me. Director of the shop where we went came to say hallo to us.

During the war

I remember the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. I woke up on the dawn of 22 June 1941 hearing my mother and father talking. My father was saying 'No, this is just another training. Don't worry!' and mother replied 'This cannot be training'. I remember what she said and in the afternoon we heard Molotov [17](#) speaking on the radio.

We left Kiev on 21 July: my mother, Zoya, I and aunt Lilia. My father took us to the station. He said 'Don't worry, you'll be back soon!' It was a common belief that the war would be over within 2-3 months.

My father perished near Kiev on 21 September 1941 when Soviet troops were retreating. This village was called Borshchi. Actually, my father had a 'white card' of release from the army service [this was a release from service in the tsarist army before the revolution of 1917 issued by a medical commission that determined that a young man was unfit for military service], but he volunteered to a Territorial Army unit [Fighting battalion][18](#), where he was deputy commanding officer. Director of the refrigeration factory was commanding officer of the unit. They were moving in a field when another bombing began. My father was moving ahead of the column in a white refrigeration truck. A bomb hit it killing my father. His employees that witnessed how he died told us about it. However, my mother always hoped that he was alive, but then we understood that he was gone since he would have let us know where he was. We received pension for him.

Our trip by train lasted over a month. We were moving to the refrigeration factory named after Engels [over 1500 km to the east from Kiev]. The refrigeration center was located in the middle of the steppe. There were barracks for employees of the center. Povolzhye Germans [German colonist] [19](#) also resided there. I still remember how delicious bread they baked! When you pushed at it and then let go it stretched back. There was brown and white bread.

We were accommodated in a four-storey hostel of the refrigeration center. It was still under construction. A few families were sleeping in one room on the floor. Many women kept hoping that

their husbands would return when the war was over. My mother was smart and realistic and went to work as a cashier in a local store. Shortly after we returned German families began to be deported to the north. Actually, the situation was difficult. I saw things like 'Heil Hitler' or 'Beat yids!' written on the walls of houses. Besides, there were talks that Povolzhye Germans launched signal flares... Perhaps, some of them supported Germans. One cannot blame a whole nation. I remember how Germans were deported. I guess they were given three days to get ready. They were not allowed to take any furniture or utensils with them. They were cursing and crying. If a husband was Russian and his wife German they had an opportunity to get permission to stay home, but when a husband was German his wife had to follow him. When they moved out we were accommodated in their barracks.

We were given lodging in a very narrow room of about 9 square meters. My mother and Zoya shared one bed and Lyolia slept on another. I had a folding bed unfolded in the evening. There was a primus or a kerosene stove in the corridor. Aunt Lyolia did the housekeeping. Germans left their food stocks and we had food at the beginning.

In 1942 my mother's brother Meyer came to see us on his leave. He was awarded an Order of Red Star and a leave. He told us later how he received an award: 'everybody else started running, but I stayed in my trench throwing grenades at those German tanks...' When Meyer saw our living conditions he said he was taking us with him. Their military unit was sent to be remanned in Orenburg [about 2000 km to the east].

Meyer's Military unit was deployed in Kagarlyk near Orenburg. It was a Tatar village of one long street with no windows facing the street. Tatars and Uzbeks build their houses facing a street. They grew sheep. There was a herd of sheep walking along the street in the morning stirring up clouds of dust. In the evening they were coming back and the dust crunched in our teeth.

We were accommodated in a clay house with no stove. My uncle sent us a soldier to make a stove. He was wearing a fading shirt and looked like a frog with his mouth and those hands... He built a stove, but it collapsed. He said in accented Russian: 'It's all right, don't worry, I will make you another stove...' He made another stove that collapsed, too. Only the third one was more or less there. It generated so much smoke, it was a nightmare. Families of the military did shopping in a store across the street. There was brown bread, vinegar, oil, garlic and green tomatoes that never got ripe in this area. Lyolia made doughnuts of this brown bread and garlic, salads of green tomatoes, spring onions and garlic. The locals didn't have a friendly attitude. Their ordinary answer to any question was 'Ne belmes' ('I don't understand' in Tatar). I don't know whether they didn't understand or just didn't want to talk.

There was no school in Kagarlyk and before September uncle Meyer's military unit was to leave Kagarlyk. We didn't want to stay among strangers. Then my mother ventured to travel to Orenburg hoping to find some lodging and a job. There was a truck routing to Orenburg from the military unit every other day. My uncle made all necessary arrangements for her return trip. Mother took a slice of bread and a bottle of water, few green tomatoes and some garlic and went to Orenburg. She walked across the town for half a day, but couldn't find any work or lodging. She got tired and sat down on a porch of a house - there were four-storied buildings in the center of the town, but the rest of them were one-storied houses. She was sitting there chewing when all of a sudden she heard somebody addressing her 'Ghita Iosifovna' [the customary polite address in Russian is by

first and second name. The latter (patronymic) consists of one's father's name and a suffix: -ovna for women and -ovich for men, i.e. if Ghita's father's name was Iosif, her patronimic is 'Iosifovna'], what are you doing here?' She raises her eyes and sees Aaron Brodski, our neighbor in Kiev. In Orenburg Aaron was chief engineer of aviation repair plant. She threw herself on his chest and began to cry telling him her story. He took her to his place where she had a bath and a meal and then they helped her to rent an apartment. Mother came back home happy and told us that we could go to Orenburg. This was actually a room leading to two other rooms where owners of the apartment lived.

My mother soon met a man from Kiev who knew my father well and he helped her with employment at the meat packing factory where she was a shipment forwarder. Actually she delivered meat on horse-driven carts. However, she could bring home some bare ribs or beef legs and my aunt made us studen' [studen', or holodets: a cold meat dish, usually made of boiled bones with little meat on them, the meat is mixed with the bouillon and cooled, after which it becomes jelly-like because of high percentage of gelatin in it] of them. It helped us to survive. Half a year later mother found another apartment in the basement of a house. There were window shutters closing from the side of a street. I remember how local bandits tried to break into our lodging through the windows. They removed those shutters, but we were screaming there and they ran away. The locals only spoke in curses they didn't know any other language. There were many bugs in the houses. It was an ordinary thing for them.

My sister and I fell very ill in Orenburg: I had paratyphoid and Zoya had pneumonia. Fortunately, we found a doctor: professor Ierusalimski from Moscow. Zoya had high fever and professor told mother to get some sulfidine, a new medication. Mother managed to get some and Zoya began to recover. Mother was exhausted: she went to work during a day and at night she sat beside Zoya's bed watching her. I don't know how she managed to live through it, but she never gave up and stood the circumstances.

I went to a Russian school for girls in Orenburg. I actively participated in pioneer and Komsomol activities [20](#). Other children elected me chairman of our school pioneer unit council. I liked it. I was responsible for organizing meetings, political classes, visits to local hospitals to attend to patients and perform concerts. Once our school Party organizer Nadezhda Ivanovna said to me 'Vera, you will make a speech about your pioneer organization and your work at the regional Komsomol conference. I will help you to write your speech.' When we sat to prepare the speech she began to dictate it to me. She was dictating about something I hadn't done. I was an honest girl and I really did a lot of work that I was planning to talk about. I said 'Nadezhda Ivanovna, but this is not what we've done!' 'It's all right, you put it down and then you will read this part of your speech.' Actually, after this I gave up my Komsomol activities. On our way back to Kiev I purposely 'lost' my Komsomol membership card due to my disappointment in such activities. Then in Kiev I resumed my membership in Komsomol. I needed it to continue my studies in a higher educational institution. But when I entered a college I 'lost' it again. However, since students had to be Komsomol members I joined Komsomol again. I couldn't afford to be a 'black sheep'.

I was responsible for fetching water to the house. My aunt was weak and sickly and mother was at work. In 1942 - 1943 winter was very severe. We fetched water from pumps. There was so much ice on the ground that the pump was in the middle of an ice hill. I climbed that hill, and waited until water squirted in my bucket. I left my shoulder yoke down the hill. There was also a line of

people to get water. You can imagine, I once slipped and fell and the water poured out of my buckets. I got wet, but other people didn't allow me to refill my buckets. I had to stand in line waiting for my turn.

We were so happy to hear the word 'Victory!' in May 1945! We began to get prepared to go home. My mother, I, Zoya, aunt Lyolia and Vitia went back by freight train. We returned to our apartment. There was no furniture left. Varia, our nanny, watched where our furniture was gone and our mother demanded it back. Later my mother's brothers and sisters also received lodgings. Meyer stayed with us. I lived there until I got married.

After the war

In Kiev I went to the 9th grade of school #53 in 1945. There were Ukrainian classes beginning from the 5th form in all Russian schools in Kiev. I hadn't studied Ukrainian in evacuation and was dismissed from these classes. I had many friends and we went to the cinema, theater or just for a walk in the park missing many classes at school. I already decided to enter Theatrical College after school and focused on literature and history.

My mother took over any job to support the family. She was selling things and got involved in illegal apartment exchange business. We were surviving. We were often hungry. Our mother received a pension for our father, but it was a miserable amount.

In September 1945 my sister Zoya went to new Russian school #135. She was the best student at school and was to receive a medal after school [the highest award to best students of secondary schools in the USSR]. However, after finishing school in 1955 she received only a silver medal. Zoya had a classmate whose father was a Party official. There was limited number of gold and silver medal awards and that girl received a gold medal. This injustice was the first big shock in her life. She entered the Faculty of Sanitary Hygiene in Kiev Medical College. She was to take one entrance exams. She passed it successfully and finished her college successfully. She married Zheldakov, a Russian man. They have one son, Ilya. She went to work at the Institute of food hygiene where she defended thesis and became candidate of sciences [Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees] [21](#). She got a job offer in the Academic Institute named after Sysin in Moscow and they decided to move to Moscow. My mother moved to Moscow with Zoya in 1965 and lived there until she died in 1980. She was buried at the town cemetery in Moscow. Zoya became director of a laboratory. She was scientific secretary of the All-Union department of Water Environment Safety. She defended her doctor's dissertation. She is still at the head of her laboratory and is one of 7 leading water ecologists in the world.

After finishing school I entered the Theatrical College. I have dim memories of the years of my studies, 1946 - 1951. we studied and had rehearsals, went for walks and to discos. We often went to the cinema. After finishing college I went to work at the theater for young spectators where I met my husband Vilia [full name Vilen] Dreezo.

My husband Vilia Dreezo, a Jew, was born in Kiev, I guess, in 1928. His father Ovsey Driez was a Jewish poet [Ovsey Driez (1908 - 1971) a Soviet Jewish writer] Ovsey was born in the Jewish town of Krasnoye in Vinnitsa region. Ovsey Driez wrote in Yiddish. He received a traditional Jewish education and studied in a Ukrainian secondary school and Kiev Art School. In 1934 he volunteered to the Red Army where he served in front troops until 1947. In 1939 - 1941 he was in Western

Ukraine. He was helping Jewish refugees that escaped from the Nazis. During the war he met Lidia Ionova, a Russian woman from Moscow. He moved to Moscow with her and lived in Moscow until the end of his life. My husband's mother Ida Biz divorced Ovsey in the late 1930s and she was married a second time when I met her. I know little about her life. I know that she was a Yiddish teacher in a Jewish school in Kiev before the war. When this school was closed Ida became a teacher of the Russian literature and language in a Ukrainian school. Many other Jewish teachers changed their specializations and made best teachers in schools.

Vilia didn't tell me about his childhood. I know that he finished a secondary school in Kiev in 1946 and in 1947 he went to serve in the army. By the way, he changed his father's last name. An Honored journalist of Ukraine Vladlen Novozhylov described this episode in his book 'Soldiers from Evbaz'. He was Vilia's fellow comrade and they knew each other since they were at school. Vilia and Vladlen went in for shooting training. Vilia was training to shoot from a small caliber rifle and became a champion of Ukraine and Vladlen learned to shoot from a gun. They served in the same military unit. Other fellow comrades teased Vilia finding the surname of Driez extremely funny. Vladlen got a clerk in their office drunk and made him add 'o' at the end. This was how my husband had his surname changed to Dreezo.

Vilia demobilized in 1952 and went to work at our theater as electrician. He was promoted to electric engineering manager. We met and Vilia courted me for a while. We got married in 1954. We had a civil ceremony in a registry office. There was no wedding party.

We lived with Vilia's mother Ida. They had two rooms in a communal apartment in the house for writers. Formerly chairman of the union of writers of Ukraine Kirilenko arrested in 1937 lived in this apartment. He must have been executed. His family received a certificate that it happened when he was trying to escape. There were four rooms in the apartment. Two of them the Driez family received. Vilia and I were accommodated in the go-through room in this apartment.

My son Alyosha [full name Aleksei] was born in 1956. We had a common balcony with the family of Sosyura [Vladimir Sosyura (1898-1965): a famous Soviet Ukrainian poet]. About two weeks after Alyosha was born Maria Gavrilovna Sosyura brought us a baby-carriage. So my Alyosha grew up in the baby-carriage that formerly belonged to the Sosyura family. We had good relationships with them.

My mother-in-law spoke fluent Yiddish. She exchanged words in Yiddish with her second husband. However, they spoke Russian in the family. We kept our good relationships even after I divorced Vilia. She helped me to look after Alyosha. She was a smart woman.

My husband's family didn't celebrate any Jewish holidays. They were a Soviet family. Ida Aronovna was a convinced 'Orthodox' communist. We celebrated New Year, 1 May, day of October Revolution [22](#) and Victory Day [23](#). We had parties and sang Soviet songs. My husband and I had many friends. We went to theaters and concerts. There were jazz bands from other countries coming on tours.

I've never faced any national discrimination; at school, college or at work – never. Perhaps I was lucky to be working with intelligent people. On 5 March 1953 there was a mourning meeting at the theater. I made a speech and said 'Stalin is like air for us. We can't live without breathing air' – what nonsense I was saying, but at that time this was what we believed and thought.

I'd rather not talk about my private life. I didn't have it. My son and I lived in a one-room apartment since early 1960s. I left my theater to look after my son and if I had stayed at the theater I would have returned home late at night. I was a housewife for few years. I didn't get a chance to go back to work at the theater: there were no vacancies. In 1960 I went to work as a consultant at Kiev Institute of advanced training of teachers. I was responsible for making arrangements for conferences, discussions of new school curricula, innovations and school academic plans. I retired from this position in 1984.

My son Aleksei Dreezo went to the first grade of a Russian school in Kiev in 1963. He was always aware of his parents' and his own Jewish identity and had no problems with it. We didn't observe any Jewish traditions. I even didn't know any. We would have been even afraid of coming close to a synagogue [Struggle against religion] [24](#). Of course, I cannot turn to religion at the end of my life or observe any traditions or celebrate holidays. We celebrated Soviet and family events and holidays and invited my colleagues and later – my son's friends. Aleksei studied well at school and had many friends. After finishing school he entered the Production faculty of the Kiev College of Culture. He finished it in 1977 and was producer of concerts for a long time. Aleksei married his co-student, a Ukrainian girl. I liked my daughter-in-law and was happy that my son found his second 'half'. Aleksei has a grown up daughter, my granddaughter. She studies in the conservatory in Kiev. They speak Russian and Ukrainian in their family. They do not observe any Jewish traditions. They celebrated Soviet holidays in the past.

In 1991 perestroika [25](#) began [Editor's note: perestroika was actually launched before 1991, right after Gorbachev came to power in 1985]. My son and his wife lost their jobs. My granddaughter entered the music school named after Lysenko and they needed money to pay for her studies. Their situation was very hard. Somebody recommended me to go to Hesed, this charity organization. I liked the friendly atmosphere there and nice people. They provided food assistance and medications to people. I also wanted to do something good. I suggested that I could read lectures. In 1992 was 90th birthday anniversary of Ovsey Driez and we made a very nice soiree dedicated to him. I spoke about him. To prepare for my lectures I went to libraries and archives and read magazines and newspapers. I got acquainted with the Jewish culture going too deep into Judaism. The lectures that I read can be united under the title 'Jews and the world culture'.

Neither my son nor I have considered emigration. Aleksei and his wife work for private business that has nothing to do with their education. They deal in commerce. I can't speak for my children, but speaking for myself I can say that I've found my niche. Of course, it's not easy to lecture to people and travel a lot, but it's interesting. I meet with many nice people traveling to Ukrainian towns. I lecture to them and they tell me about themselves. This gives me a feeling of the fullness of life.

GLOSSARY:

1 Cantonist

The cantonists were Jewish children who were conscripted to military institutions in tsarist Russia with the intention that the conditions in which they were placed would force them to adopt Christianity. Enlistment for the cantonist institutions was most rigorously enforced in the first half of the 19th century. It was abolished in 1856 under Alexander II. Compulsory military service for

Jews was introduced in 1827. Jews between the age of 12 and 25 could be drafted and those under 18 were placed in the cantonist units. The Jewish communal authorities were obliged to furnish a certain quota of army recruits. The high quota that was demanded, the severe service conditions, and the knowledge that the conscript would not observe Jewish religious laws and would be cut off from his family, made those liable for conscription try to evade it.. Thus, the communal leaders filled the quota from children of the poorest homes.

2 Jewish Pale of Settlement

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

3 Denikin, Anton Ivanovich (1872-1947)

White Army general. During the Civil War he fought against the Red Army in the South of Ukraine.

4 Russian Revolution of 1917

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

5 Civil War (1918-1920)

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

6 Great Patriotic War

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without

declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

7 Realschule: Secondary school for boys in Russia before the revolution of 1917. Students studied mathematics, physics, natural history, foreign languages and drawing. After finishing this school they could enter higher industrial and agricultural educational institutions.

8 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.

9 Babi Yar

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.

10 Trotsky, Lev Davidovich (born Bronshtein) (1879-1940)

Russian revolutionary, politician and statesman. Trotsky participated in the social-democratic movement from 1894 and supported the idea of the unification of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks from 1906. In 1905 he developed the idea of the 'permanent revolution'. He was one of the leaders of the October Revolution and a founder of the Red Army. He widely applied repressive measures to support the discipline and 'bring everything into revolutionary order' at the front and the home front. The intense struggle with Stalin for the leadership ended with Trotsky's defeat. In 1924 his views were declared petty-bourgeois deviation. In 1927 he was expelled from the Communist Party, and exiled to Kazakhstan, and in 1929 abroad. He lived in Turkey, Norway and then Mexico. He excoriated Stalin's regime as a bureaucratic degeneration of the proletarian power. He was murdered in Mexico by Stalin's order.

11 Common name

Russified or Russian first names used by Jews in everyday life and adopted in official documents. The Russification of first names was one of the manifestations of the assimilation of Russian Jews at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In some cases only the spelling and pronunciation of Jewish names was russified (e.g. Isaac instead of Yitskhak; Boris instead of Borukh), while in other cases traditional Jewish names were replaced by similarly sounding Russian names (e.g. Eugenia instead of Ghita; Yury instead of Yuda). When state anti-Semitism intensified in the USSR at the end of the 1940s, most Jewish parents stopped giving their children traditional Jewish names to avoid

discrimination.

12 Komsomol

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

13 VERYOVKA - Grigoriy Gurievich Veryovka (1895 - 1964)

a famous Ukrainian Soviet composer, conductor.

14 Bolshoi Theater

World famous national theater in Moscow, built in 1776. The first Russian and foreign opera and ballet performances were staged in this building.

15 Primus stove

a small portable stove with a container for about 1 liter of kerosene that was pumped into burners.

16 Great Terror (1934-1938)

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

17 Molotov, V

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

18 Fighting battalion

People's volunteer corps during World War II; its soldiers patrolled towns, dug trenches and kept an

eye on buildings during night bombing raids. Students often volunteered for these fighting battalions.

19 German colonists

Ancestors of German peasants, who were invited by Empress Catherine II in the 18th century to settle in Russia.

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21 Soviet/Russian doctorate degrees

Graduate school in the Soviet Union (aspirantura, or internatura for medical students), which usually took about 3 years and resulted in a dissertation. Students who passed were awarded a 'kandidat nauk' (lit. candidate of sciences) degree. If a person wanted to proceed with his or her research, the next step would be to apply for a doctorate degree (doktarontura). To be awarded a doctorate degree, the person had to be involved in the academia, publish consistently, and write an original dissertation. In the end he/she would be awarded a 'doctor nauk' (lit. doctor of sciences) degree.

22 October Revolution Day

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

23 Victory Day

On May, 9 1945 - The Great Patriotic War ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945. This day of a victory was a grandiose and most liked holiday in the USSR.

24 Struggle against religion

The 1930s was a time of anti-religion struggle in the USSR. In those years it was not safe to go to synagogue or to church. Places of worship, statues of saints, etc. were removed; rabbis, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests disappeared behind KGB walls.

25 Perestroika

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s. Perestroika [restructuring] was the term attached to the attempts (1985-91) by Mikhail Gorbachev to transform the stagnant, inefficient

command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratise the Communist party organization. By 1991, perestroika was on the wane, and after the failed August Coup of 1991 was eclipsed by the dramatic changes in the constitution of the union.