

Maria Yakovlevna Komarovskaya

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Kiev

Ukraine

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My family background

I, Maria Yakovlevna Komarovskaya, was born in Oster on July 19, 1925. Oster is a small town in Chernigov region, which used to be a district center. Then this center was moved to Kozelets because Oster was far away from the highway. The town is beautiful and is located on the bank of the Desna river.

My father, Yakov Chaimovich Komarovsky, was born in Kiev in 1897. My mother, Chaya-Beila Volfovna Komarovskaya (nee - Bezprozvannaya) was also born in Kiev in 1897. The parents of my father, my grandparents, lived in Oster. My grandfather's name was Chaim Komarovsky. I don't know exactly what year he was born in. the grandfather owned a metalwork shop. He repaired various tools, such as ploughs and holdfasts for the peasants. I remember that the workshop was across from the house where grandfather lived, and I often ran to the workshop to see how he worked. I liked watching him work very much.

My grandmother's name was Chaya-Risl Komarovskaya. I don't know her maiden name.

Grandfather and grandmother lived in a one-floor house for a long time. The house had four or five rooms. They occupied a half of the house. The second half was occupied by the doctor of Oster by the name of Vegeratsky. I remember that house well. I was born there. From the entrance led a big hallway, from which was an entrance to the doctor's rooms (to the right) and on the left were two rooms where my grandparents and parents lived. My mother told me that there was a pear tree right outside the window and she was in bed after delivery, the pears dropped almost in the room. There was a stove to heat the house, but the toilet and water were outside the house. There was also a big outhouse with a garden. And then grandfather bought another house, or rather also half a house in the central street. That house had five rooms, two of which were immediately rented out, and three were occupied by our family. There was also a fruit garden outside the house. In city was not much Jewish family. In Oster there were Ukrainians living around. Living all much amicably. Besides Yiddish and Russian, Ukrainian often sounded at our home. The town was small - two or three central streets with stores and town buildings. Farther on there were typical Ukrainian village houses. [This were small wooden buildings, on 2 or 3 rooms, with the toilet on the street. Roof was it usually covered by straw. In the house was a stove, which sank firewood's. Usually near by the

house was a garden with fruits by trees and vegetable garden, where grew vegetables for its family. In the courtyard always was a pit, whence took water and small wooden building, for the piglet and fowl.]

Grandmother took care of the house. There was a “Russian stove” in the kitchen; grandmother heated it and cooked in it.

Grandparents had five children: four sons (my father was the eldest) and one daughter, the youngest. The eldest son was my father, Yakov Komarovsky, who was born on April 12, 1897. He was followed by his brother Leva (Jewish name – Leibl), who was born in around 1898; then brother Gersh, born in 1901 and brother Mitya, born in 1903. The youngest was sister Rebecca, Riva, born in around 1908.

My father left the home early. He took part in the civil war. He was making his own life. During the civil war he fought somewhere in the south of Ukraine.

After the civil war my father passed high school exams and entered the Kiev Polytechnic Institute. He was able to learn there for three years. But the time was hard, he had two small children and had to provide for the family, so he had to quit studies and think of earning money. I think he entered the Institute in around 1925.

None of the brothers had university education.

Leva, or Leibl, lived in Chernigov and was a simple worker at a plant. Gersh and Mitya lived in Kiev, but I don’t know what they did and where they worked.

Their sister Rebecca finished some courses immediately after the Revolution and became a junior school teacher. I don’t remember whether any one of them attended the synagogue, but I am sure all of them celebrated all Jewish holidays.

Mother told me that grandparents were religious. Later, my parents moved out of Oster, and I came to visit my grandparents on vacation. I remember that in the morning grandmother would stand at the window and whisper a prayer in Yiddish.

With children, that is, with their grandchildren, they spoke Russian, but with each other they spoke Yiddish. I remember that there was a synagogue in Oster and mother said that grandparents went there on holidays.

In 1927 my parents moved to Chernigov, and in 1930 – to Kiev. Both of them were born in Kiev. The family of my father moved to Oster during the civil war because it was easier to survive in those hungry times in a small town. After the civil war my father went back to his parents in Oster. But he always missed Kiev and wanted to come back here.

The origin of my mother’s maiden name is very interesting. Her maiden name was Bezprozvannaya.

I’m not sure who exactly – my mother’s grandfather or great-grandfather – was an orphan. This orphan boy ran around begging for money. He was found and sent to the soldiers at the age of 13 or 14. When he was asked about his last name, he always said he was Gendelevich. But the soldiers wanted to baptize him. And every time they would force him to be baptized he would pretend to get crazy. He would bite, kick and yell at the top of his lungs, “I am Gendelevich, I am Gendelevich!” But in his documents it was written that he was “bez prozvanya” – “without last name”, that’s where his last name “Bezprozvanny” came from. So, his children became Bezprozvannies as well – grandfather, mother and father, their sisters and brothers. This grandfather became a “cantonist”, which means a service man who lived in a village but when it was necessary he could be called up to serve in the army.

My grandfather, my mother’s father, worked as a metalworker at a sausage factory in Kiev. I don’t

know his name because when I was born he was dead. Neither did I know my grandmother – my mother’s mother.

My mother was the eldest child in the family. She was born in 1897, studied at a commercial school in Kiev, finished it in 1915 and taught, mostly gave private lessons. After she married my father, she did not work any more but looked after the house and children.

As I’ve already said, my mother was the eldest child. After her, her brother Semen, or Shimon was born. He was born in 1904. Semen was a military man and a political leader. Prior to the war he was an officer, then he was sent to Western Ukraine when it was annexed. He has gone through the whole Second World War and after the war he served in the occupational troops in Germany for a long time. After Shimon their sister Leah, or Liza, was born. She was born in 1908. She worked at a telephone station. Then their sister Perl was born. At home she was called Paya. Her death was tragic: during delivery (she gave birth to a girl named Zina) she got some shot from a doctor. After that she began to lose her mind and when her daughter was a month and a half, Perl committed suicide. The fifth son was Moisey, Misha, born in 1915. He graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic Institute right before the war. He worked as an engineer at a military plant. He spent the whole war working at that plant and after the war was the main specialist there. This is all I know about my mother’s brothers and sisters.

During the civil war, when Jewish pogroms took place in Kiev and Petlyura’s and Denikin’s gangs were around, my mother’s uncle was killed. I don’t know where my mother, her sisters and brothers were at that time.

My parents got married in 1919, and in April 1920 my elder brother Yosif Komarovsky was born. I was born in 1925. I had no more brothers or sisters.

I went to school in Kiev in 1932. It was a regular Russian secondary school. Our teachers were Russian, Jewish, and Ukrainian. I studied there for three years and then I moved to another one, which was closer to my house. So, the head of that second school was a Jew by the name of Mikhail Solomonovich Kagan. And there were many Jewish teachers there: our class master Berta Markovna Ruzhinskaya and many others.

Students in our school were of different nationalities, but there were many Jews, maybe a half. We were all friends and nobody ever tried to find out who belongs to which nationality.

Our family was not religious. I don’t even remember ever celebrating any Jewish holidays at home. I remember that we celebrated every Soviet holiday though – May 1, October Revolution Day, etc. These holidays were celebrated both at home and at school. I don’t even remember ever having a matzo at home.

But I should say that people in those years refused to celebrate not only Jewish, but also Christian holidays. I can say so because even though I often visited my Russian friends, I never saw them celebrating any Christian holiday at home. All religions were forbidden then, that is why I saw neither matzo on the Jewish Passover nor cakes on the Christian Easter at my Russian friends’ houses.

Growing up

We all were Soviet children. I remember how I became a young pioneer, I even remember the words of the oath we took, “I, a young pioneer of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in front of my comrades give a solemn oath...” We wore pioneer ties of red. I was in charge of a pioneer unit in our class and organized different meetings. We sang songs at those meetings and I liked it. I

could not become a member of Komsomol because the war broke out.

The very next year after I started to go to school, great famine began in Ukraine. My parents did their best to protect their children from starving. We did not have enough to eat, but we did not understand why. I remember that father got some food at his work. If he had a candy in his food “parcel” he kept it to give me. My elder brother Iosif also tried to treat me with any delicious stuff he could get. I loved my brother very much.. As I grew older, I understood that famine in Ukraine was due to the fact that all harvest was taken from peasants by force. But our life in general was so poor that we thought hunger and a lack of normal clothes was a normal thing in life, that it was how all people were supposed to live.

Only on the eve of the Second World War our life became a little better.

Our flat was small. It was on the first floor and had one room with high ceiling that was divided in half by a wooden wall. The entrance was from the yard. There was some kind of a small wooden tambour, so the entrance led through that tambour into the room. The tambour contained a small kitchen. At the end of the room was a small door with a small premise on the one end of which was a tap and on the other – toilet and bathroom. We washed in a big basin: just heated up water on a primus stove and washed. We heated the flat with the stove too. Behind the wall of our room was a drug store, and for some reason we had very unpleasant smells from it in our room sometimes. My father worked as a chief accountant at the printing shop of the People’s Commissariat of the Interior. It was considered a very prestigious job. When arrests began at the end of the 1930-s, my father was very afraid that he might be arrested. I remember he would come home sad from work, worried; he talked to my mother in whisper a lot but would not tell me anything. Many people around us were arrested; we even had a new term – “the enemy of the nation”. Fortunately, arrests did not touch our family. I only remember worrisome talk about somebody from our house who was arrested. It happened very often because our house was big and many people lived in our yard. My brother, Iosif Komarovsky, finished school in 1937 and entered the Leningrad Military-Engineering College. Iosif was a very cheerful guy. Very often his friends came together at our house and they always invited me too. I worshipped my brother. I remember how he sent us pictures from his college, how proud he was that he would become an officer. In 1939 he fell very ill and he was sent home for treatment. He spent several weeks at home and then we saw him off to Leningrad again. I remember that seeing-off very well, because I have never again seen my brother. He and all of his co-students were sent to the Finnish war. My brother was killed in January 1940 having not reached even 20 years old.

One of his friends from the college wrote about this to his friend in Kiev. That friend went to my father’s work because he was afraid to come to our house. Then my father told my mother and me about it. And only later we received an official message that Lieutenant Iosif Yakovlevich Komarovsky died as a hero. We also received some money; maybe it was his salary, as well as his notebook, our letters to him and pictures. So, by the time the war with Germany broke out, my brother had already been dead.

I don’t remember anyone at home talking about the coming of fascism to power in Germany or about Germany. I believe our parents cared so much for us that they did not want us to learn of anything bad.

During the war

On June 22, 1941, Kiev was bombed at night. For some reason I did not sleep well that night and heard everything. But I thought it was military training. In those years all men were called up to the army for 2-3 months for training. In the morning, when we had our breakfast, our neighbor breakfasted with us because my mother invited him after his family had gone to the village for the summer. This neighbor was a Communist Party member. So, over breakfast some man came to this neighbor, whispered something into his ear – and the neighbor left immediately. We became anxious but did not link his leaving with the bombing. And a few hours later Molotov addressed the nation on the radio and said that the war had begun. Then we listened to the famous speech of Stalin, “Dear brothers and sisters, I turn to you, my friends...”.

I had just finished 8 grades and was going to Oster to my grandparents. But on July 5 we went to evacuation. The husband of my mother’s sister took us to the train station and put on a train with the wives of his colleagues. At the train station we stood for another 5 days, during which my father was taken to the army. So, we traveled all over Ukraine. We went through Donbass and reached Uzlovaya station 200 km off Moscow. Then we were put on heated wagon and taken further on. There were many families in these wagons and all of them sat and slept on their bags and suitcases. When the train stopped we were afraid to get off it, so we just bought foods from the peasants who would come up to our train. We got off in the village of Podgornoye, Tambov region. My mother and I worked in a collective farm there.

Then, in autumn, we moved eastward on. The Germans were approaching, and we evacuated to Orenburg. Our far relatives lived there and we stayed with them for a few months. We all lived in a small room in a dormitory: my mother and me, the wife of my mother’s brother Shimon with two children, my mother’s sister Liza with her daughter and two mother’s cousins.

Then the husband of my mother’s sister found my father who was a commissary in an air college in Chkalovsk, not far from Orenburg, and he took us to live with him. Mother went to work at a telegraph. She did not work before the war, but there she learned and began to work at a telegraph.

In Chkalovsk I went to the 9th class. I went there in February, so I had to study a lot in order to catch up with my class because I had missed a lot. I was a good student. And I finished all 10 grades successfully. We had different students at our class: locals and evacuated. There were many Jews too. It is funny, but the local population never saw Jews before, so they were nice to us. Our life was hard, just like everybody else’s life. We received bread for bread cards. We had to stand in lines since early morning, even night in order to get bread. I remember one time I stood in a line since very early morning, but the local women pushed me out of the line and I could not get my bread. They treated me like an enemy. But it was not caused by me being Jewish; I think they treated me like that only because I was not a local resident.

I finished school in evacuation and entered university. A branch of the Kharkov Institute of Railway Engineers had just opened there; the main office was in Tashkent at the time. In 1944 I went to Kharkov together with other students of that Institute because Kharkov was already free of the Germans. My parents remained in evacuation. My father was badly wounded during the war so he was an invalid.

After the war

When the war was over, we all returned to Kiev. When we came to Kiev we had no place to live in because our flat had burned. Our whole house burned down, only one part with another entrance was whole. My friend lived in that second entrance. When Kiev was liberated I wrote her a letter,

but she was not living there any more. Our other neighbor got this letter. The fate of this neighbor was no simple as well. He was Jewish. During the retreat of the army he was encircled and remained in the occupied territory. He worked as a stableman in a village in Poltava region. The village elder told him he knew he was Jewish, but did not let him down. This neighbor Mikhail wrote to me that we can come and we stayed at his flat for some time. When I returned to Kiev, there were only few of my former friends there. One of my friends Fanya was killed in Babiy Yar – she and her mother did not evacuate in time. I also had a Russian friend – Svetlana Yershova, who stayed in Kiev during occupation. Svetlana’s elder sister worked for the Germans, but was spying for the guerillas and helped them a lot. Right before the liberation of Kiev she was arrested together with Svetlana and their mother. They were all shot in Babiy Yar.

My father, Yakov Komarovsky, returned from the war as an invalid. After the war he worked for some time as an accountant, but then he retired. He died in Kiev in 1975. My mother died soon after him – in 1980.

In the last years of their lives my parents began to keep the traditions of the Jewish nation. They began to go to the synagogue and celebrate the main Jewish holidays.

Father’s brother Leibl Komarovsky was killed at the front. Both of his sons Boris and Mark Komarovsky were killed as well.

Can be the same paragraph! Father’s brother Gersh Komarovsky stayed in Kiev as part of the anti-aircraft defense troops. But he failed to retreat together with his troops and was killed in Kiev, in Babiy Yar. His family was in evacuation.

Can be the same paragraph! Brother Mitya was a very sick person – he had asthma. He was in Soleretsk in evacuation.

Can be the same paragraph! Father’s sister Rebecca with children was there as well. After the war Rebecca and her husband moved to Riga. Riva died soon after the war; she died because of cancer. Her elder son also died at the age of 30, while two others moved to Israel at the very beginning of emigration and we lost all communication with them.

Mother’s brother Semen (Shimon) Bezprozvanny spent all his life as a military. He died in 1974.

Mother’s sister Leah was in evacuation. Upon returning to Kiev she could no longer work because of a heart disease. She received pension as an invalid and died in the beginning of the 1960-s.

Brother Moisey spent all the war working at a military plant. His wife was working with him. He and his wife met in the university. Moisey died in 1978 in Kiev. My grandfather, father’s father Yakov Komarovsky, died in evacuation in Soleretsk in 1942. Grandmother survived evacuation and died either in 1960 or 1961 at the age of 86.

Then my father received a terrible little flat in the Victory Square, where we lived for 14 or 15 years. Our life was pure suffering there. There was no toilet even outside – only in the next yard. After the war the attitude towards the Jewish population changed radically. I remember our street cleaner Matrena Sergeyevna and her husband uncle Grisha did not even greet me when I returned to Kiev after the war. They just looked away. The word “kike” could be heard everywhere. People all over said that “kikes” did not fight in the war, but spent the war in Tashkent. All this talk did not touch me personally. I studied at a department with more than 100 students of different nationalities. And even though the “Doctors’ case” was discussed on radio and TV, even though anti-Semitic campaigns were launched all over the country, it did not touch us, the students of our department. Maybe due to our young age we treated it like something foreign to us. I almost never read newspapers and was far from politics. My parents were outraged – by quietly. But at that time everyone was afraid to express his or her opinion to what was going on.

My mother said that before the Revolution there were court hearings in Kiev that accused a Jew by the name of Beilis. This process was well known and became part of history. When that court hearing ended with the verdict of “non-guilty”, my mother’s friends from school – Russian girls – congratulated her on the fact that her fellow Jew was pronounced innocent. On the contrast with this, when it became clear that the Jewish doctors of the Kremlin were not guilty and that charges against them were false, nobody congratulated me or other Jews; nobody even reacted in any way. When Stalin died, we all cried a lot. We were so scared – what will happen to us now that the “father of nations” was gone? Nobody linked repression, arrests and fight against cosmopolitanism with his name. Then rumors began about it, and then the famous 20th congress of the party took place that opened our eyes to the truth.

I was transferred to the Kiev Engineering Institute and graduated from it in 1949 majoring in industrial and civil construction. After graduation from university I was sent to work at the Kiev Design Institute. I worked as an engineer and then as a chief engineer there. Then I moved to another research institute and worked there until retirement. The top of my career was the chief of the group – nothing higher. If I had not been Jewish, I would have certainly been promoted more. But then the authorities thought they should promote those who could change jobs. Since it was hard for the Jews to find a job, they never quit their existing jobs and thus were never promoted. I remember when emigration to Israel began, special open meetings were held in our institute to put to shame those who were going to Israel. One time I could be silent no more and told the meeting that such people were not traitors, but they simply wanted to leave with their families, which is their personal business. After that I was summoned to the Communist Party committee, even though I was not a party member, and was warned that if I ever repeat such statements, I would be fired from work. In 1953 I married Naum Iosifovich Polyak. We studied at the same institute but at different courses – my husband came to the institute from the army and graduated one year after me. My husband was born in 1923 in the town of Fastov into a large Jewish family. He received Jewish education, then finished school and practically at once got to the war. Upon graduation he was sent to work at the “Giproselproekt” research institute and worked there 40 years till retirement. Even though he was the main specialist near the time of his retirement, he often felt biased attitude to himself as a Jew. Thus, for many years we could not get a flat, even though he was the first in line for flat. Every time the authorities found an excuse to push him back in that line.

When we got married, we had no wedding ceremony. We simply went home and had a party. Our living conditions were poor. We lived in one room with parents, my husband and then my baby. Then we also hired a nanny because somebody had to watch the baby when we were gone. So, all these 6 people lived in one 15-meter room.

In 1954 our daughter Margarita was born and in 1959 – our second daughter Yevgenia. Our elder daughter identified herself totally as a Jew. Her friends were Jewish and she married a Jew. At school she felt no biased attitude. But when she took entering exams to university, she saw that on the list of students, there were special checks against every Jewish name, and the teachers were not allowed to give good marks to the Jews. Margarita fell one point short and through some good connections she was taken to the evening department of the Construction Institute. Our younger daughter Yevgenia had the same story repeated – she was flunked by her teacher at the exam and went to Moscow to enter the Communications Institute to study by correspondence.

Our elder daughter moved to Israel in 1992 and her daughter, though born in Ukraine, identifies herself fully with Israelis. She is now going to get married and my husband and I have been invited

to the wedding. My granddaughter works as a civilian in the Israeli army after graduation from the Haifa University.

My younger daughter Yevgenia is more inclined to Russian and Ukrainian cultures; she has little Jewish in herself. To be honest, it seems sometimes that Jews irritate her. Her husband is Ukrainian and her children, my grandchildren, were baptized and are raised as Orthodox Christians. I can't understand this and cannot accept it, even though I keep good relations with my daughter. On weekends she and her children always come over. I try to pass to my grandchildren those little things that I still have in my life – the love to the Jewish people, their history and traditions.

Now, in independent Ukraine, it became possible for every nation, including for the Jews, to identify themselves as a nation. There are Jewish religious communities in Ukraine, there are three synagogues in Kiev, one of which we attend. This synagogue is located in the territory of one of the Kiev plants, and the plant restituted it to the Jewish community. My husband and I read Jewish papers, go to the Jewish charity “Khesed” center, and receive free meals and other kinds of help. We try to note Jewish holidays, though, if speak honestly, do not know as this needed to do. Keep post in Yam Kippur, light candles on Chanukah. It is certainly a great pity that we are beginning to identify ourselves with the Jews so late, but it is probably a destiny typical to the Jews of my generation in this country.