

# Vera Sonina

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Russia

Interviewer: Olga Egudina

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*I met Vera Markovna Sonina in her cozy room in the House of Veterans of the Stage. [House of Veterans of the Stage was founded in 1896 by an actress Savina and was called Refuge for Aged Actors. At that time financial support was given mainly by private persons and institutions. Now the complex includes 7 inhabited buildings (185 places), a library, a concert hall, a special medical building, and a large park. Authorities are responsible for financial support of the inhabitants.] Vera Markovna is short, slim, light on her feet. Her eyes are dark brown. She manages to make an atmosphere of coziness and kindness around. Vera Markovna attracts attention of her interlocutor by her sincere youthful interest to outward life.*

*Unfortunately, the text of interview cannot fully impress the reader with Vera Markovna's charm. She tells her life story accompanying it with singing, and sometimes even dancing.*

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## My family background

I regret to say that I know nothing about my grandparents, especially about my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers. I do not remember anybody of them alive. But I will never forgive myself that I did not ask my Mum about our relatives. You know, we had so hard times that there was no time for conversations.

I was born in 1918 in Zaporozhye. We lived there only 4 years, but I remember myself from two-year-old age, therefore I can tell you something about the Zaporozhye period of our life. We lived very poorly. My father worked at a grain-collecting station. [Grain-collecting station was an office, where merchants brought grain bought from peasants.] Mum never worked. But once together with my sister we were searching something in Mum's things and came across her corset, her white bone fan and father's waistcoat of fantastic beauty. These things gave us possibility to judge about standard of living of their owners. But happy life of the family ended with my birth. Certainly the point was not in appearance of the next child in our family (I was the sixth one, including the died girl), but in the date of my birth: I was born in 1918, i.e. a year after the Revolution [1](#). Therefore I remember nothing except poverty. I do not remember if we lived in a house or in an apartment,

but I know for sure that we lived in the main and luxurious street named Sobornaya. I can tell nothing about the Jewish community of Zaporozhye and about that of Smolensk (where we moved soon), too.

I remember from our life in Zaporozhye that there were Jewish pogroms [2](#). Once Daddy told us very seriously ‘Children, silence! I forbid you either to cry or to shout or laugh.’ Parents threw all our pillows and feather-beds to the distant room, and placed there younger children (me and Annette). Shura and Slava (our elder sisters) went to the basement. You see, when they pushed me to the feather-bed I was suddenly taken with a fit of laughter, and Daddy allowed me to laugh, but only very quietly. I remember nothing about this pogrom, except my unrestrained laughter. It is so good to be little! I remember one more about Zaporozhye. My sister Zhenya disappeared suddenly. Everyone was nervous, we were running, shouting. Our neighbors shouted to each other ‘Which of them is missing?’ - ‘Zhenya, of course, who else could it be!’ She was a well-known hooligan. And in the meantime I was creeping round the yard. There was a huge stack of fire wood there. It seemed to me similar to a city with streets, lanes, and squares. And there I saw Zhenya sleeping in one of those streets. That scene is still before my eyes, and I do not know the reason: probably, anxiety of adults impressed me.

When I was about 4 years old, my father got seriously ill. Later (when I was already adult) Mum whispered in my ear that Daddy could not accept Revolution and had fallen ill out of grief. I do not know whether it was true, but indeed father could not go on working. And he was the only earner in our family. My Mum had a sister, I do not remember her name, because we always called her simply Aunt. She was always rich (and my Mum was almost always poor). We did not love her. When she visited us in Zaporozhye, she always took a view of our room with disgust and said ‘Bela, it is impossible to live this way! Where can I sit down here?’ This Aunt lived in Smolensk. Parents decided to move there to be close to our relative. In Smolensk my Aunt had a large apartment. A large pantry was adjacent to it. That was the place where we took up our residence. Can you imagine that you place your sister and her dying husband with their six children in such conditions? This is beyond my mind! I think Mum understood at once that she would get no help, but there was no other place to go. In our hovel we together with my younger sister occupied an upper bunk bed. I often woke up shivering with cold and found out that Annette had fallen down together with our blanket. Usually she did not wake up and continued to sleep on the floor!

I do not remember my father in good health. I remember him sitting on the bench and panting. In Smolensk Daddy did not work. Mum went out to buy something, to change something, to sell something. I remember that once Mum brought home two small bits of saccharin and one of sugar. She gave saccharin to us, and sugar to Daddy. His bit of sugar fell down on the floor; Daddy reached out for it and fell down himself. There happened insult to his brain, and he never recovered. He died very soon. They brought us (younger girls) to our acquaintances, which lived in the next street: they did not want us to be present at the funeral ceremony. I was excited very much and shouted ‘I will take care of Daddy!’ Probably they did not tell me that father had died. A little bit later, when I calmed down, I was allowed to go out to the street. There I saw a procession of people dressed in black and suddenly understood everything: ‘They are carrying my Daddy!’ And nobody convinced me to the contrary. Later someone from adults told us that Daddy was below ground. And we (together with my sister) played our own game Meckalka (it was me who constructed it). It was a game of dreams. And the main dream was the following. One day someone

knocks at the window, we open it and see Daddy dirty with the earth. 'Mummy, Daddy came back!' we shout, feeling no fear, only happiness because father is again with us...

Mum remained alone with 5 children, having no money, no job, and no profession. On top of it all, my elder sister Slava got ill with femur osteomyelitis. Doctors said that it was necessary to amputate her leg. But Mum answered 'Over my dead body!' She got to know from someone that in Petrograd there lived professor Kopylov who was able to treat that disease. It was unreal: just like to depart for Mars or Venus. Only a genuine mother could take that risk. In Dudinka village near Smolensk there lived uncle Grisha and aunt Sonya, mother's or father's relatives. Uncle Grisha came to Smolensk to dissuade Mum from her mad decision. Uncle Grisha brought with him a small jar with burdock oil for greasing his hair. I opened the jar, and we drunk it together with my sister. You see, what trifles I keep in my mind! But if we think it over, we'll find it to be not so trivial. First of all, you can see my mischievous character, and second: it is absolutely clear that we were very hungry. So uncle Grisha told Mum that he considered her to be abnormal and asked where she was going to find money for the trip. And Mum answered 'I'll go without money: I'll go to the engine driver and tell him that my daughter can loose her leg.' The uncle said 'But you will die on your way together with your children.' Mum answered 'So be it! But I will never let my Slava loose her leg.' It was worth seeing! You see, my Mum was a meek dove in character: she never raised her voice at or laid her finger on her children. And to tell the truth, we were worth a good beating very often. I am sure that only a genuine mother could do it.

Now before I go on with the next period of our life, I'd like to tell you what I remember about my parents. I am the last one on the earth, who is able to do it. My father Mark (Meyer) Haimovich Sonin was born in 1880; I do not remember the place of his birth. He died in 1922 in Smolensk.

My mother Bela Aronovna (Gheller) was born in 1884 in Pochepy (Ukraine). Mum died at the age of 52 in 1936. At that time she looked like a very old woman. And you can compare: at the age of 57 I played a part of golden cock, wearing a ballet suit!

My parents loved each other very much. I do not know the details of their first meeting and marriage, but I know that Mum did not want to forget Daddy after she became a widow at the age of 39.

I do not remember anything regarding political views of my parents. My father supported a large family alone: I think that he had no time for politics. However our family members used to say that it was Revolution that undermined his health. As it followed from snippets of information, long before my birth my parents lived prosperously. For example, they said that there was one more daughter who died through inadvertence of her nanny: she gave her stale milk. I do not remember any nannies or other assistants in our family. I remember that we found among mother's things some strange one and started to play with it. And Mum said 'Do not touch swaddling clouts of your late sister.'

There was a photo of my father, which showed him together with two well-dressed young gentlemen playing musical instruments. One of them played banjo, another one played a guitar, and my Daddy - a mandoline. Mum said sometimes 'Oh, your father liked to take a stroll round the clubs.' But our hand-to-mouth existence made me consider it fantastic.

Once I asked Mum, why we had such names, absolutely not Jewish. And she said that when we were born, they gave us Jewish names, but later they changed them. Originally I was called Dobe-Dveyre and my sister Annette - Dane-Ite. I immediately composed a song: Two little Jews are sitting at the table, they are Dobe-Dveyre and Dane-Ite, and they both are doubly fools. It was my first poetic experience. Our Jewish names were recorded in father's notebook. He wrote there: daughter Shura (Sara-Rose) was born, and the same about all other daughters. I remember nothing specifically Jewish from my childhood. The only remembrance about my Jewish origin was Yiddish, which our parents (and later Mum and elder sisters) spoke if they wanted to keep something from kids. We (younger sisters) did not know Yiddish at all.

I think that my parents were not religious people. I do not remember from my early childhood any Jewish holidays or Sabbath celebrations. I do not know if Daddy visited synagogue. I guess he did, and probably he prayed at home. After mother's death we found tefillin in his things. I also remember a mezuzah at the door. I think that it was in Zaporozhye: at that time I was about 4 years old and Mum took me in her arms and said 'Vera, kiss the mezuzah.'

I remember my father a little, but absolutely clear. I remember how he got ill and how he died. I loved him very much. I know that he waited for a son. And Mum gave birth only to girls. And I know that Mum lost a baby by miscarriage. I got it to know by chance. I was sent to a city children's winter sanatorium. It happened already in Leningrad. In the sanatorium they fed up weakened and hungry children. When Mum brought me to a doctor to receive an order for that sanatorium, he began to ask her about details of her pregnancies, deliveries, etc. And at that moment I heard from Mum the word miscarriage. It was unknown to me, that was why I seemed to hear a foundling. I thought that someone from our family was a foundling. In the night time (we slept in the same bed) I pressed my poor Mum 'Mum, I'll tell nobody, I swear! Which of us is a foundling, tell me!' I thought that most likely it was Annette: she was the only one with blue eyes. Many years later Mum told me that there were no foundlings in our family.

Mum was a lamblike meek person. In fact, she became a widow at the age of 39, having 5 little girls on her hands. It was necessary to feed all of them. Mum was a real beauty. Her hair was very long, it reached her knees. For a very long time she had no gray hair. And then she had a blood-stroke. I visited her in the hospital and was shocked to see her closely cropped. Mum never raised her voice speaking to us; she never laid a finger on us. But the elder sisters often beat the younger ones, and how strong! Here I have to tell you the truth that we deserved what we got. You see, our elder sisters worked, studied and kept the house. It often happened that they washed floors (in order to heat up water for it, it was necessary to burn coal in the stove!), and we (younger sisters) drew squares for hopscotch on the floor (using chalk) and jumped. Moreover, we used to invite our friends from the yard. Sometimes Mum feared for us and said 'Children, go to housing services and tell that they beat you. Soviet authorities do not allow beating children.' [Housing services are now named house management offices; they are responsible for maintenance of buildings.]

Now I understand that Mum was very lonely. Her children were friends to each other, and she got no friends in Leningrad. She did not communicate with her rich sister. Mum never worked, but strived for making her contribution on the family budget. A woman called Rivva lived next door. She had got two children and a husband. Her husband was not successful: I mean maintenance of his family. Rivva had to paddle her own canoe, like my Mum did. Somehow they got acquainted with Mum and tried to earn money together. That period of time (as well as many subsequent) was

characterized by great shortage of products. But from time to time they offered for sale fabrics in Gostiniy Dvor. [Gostiniy Dvor was one of the largest department stores in Leningrad.] People had to spend in lines all night long. And so, Mum and Rivva stood in those lines. Sometimes they took me with them: that was the way to buy some more meters of fabric. Later they carried their purchases to some person named Lyuba Chernaya. She, in turn, distributed fabrics among fashion houses and only after that she gave us money (a little bit more, than we had spent for the purchase). Our take-home pay was beggarly, but we had no possibility to refuse (our budget was very modest).

I do not remember relatives of my parents. I already told you about uncle Grisha, who was very fond of burdock oil, but I do not remember if he was kin to our family. Mother's sister, called Aunt, remained simply Aunt forever.

I do not remember anybody from our family to leave home for rest.

Well, we boarded the train, and we (younger girls) were put on the third luggage shelf. I made a protest against it, because I did not like the car ceiling to hang over me. But even under these conditions we managed to find occupation. Uncle Grisha had given us his burdock oil (possibly he had a pathological predilection for it). He said that it was an expensive thing, and we would be able to change it for something important for us. We remembered that it was forbidden to drink it, that is why we used it according to prescription, i.e. we greased our heads.

Our Aunt already lived in Petrograd. She did not manage to live in Smolensk and left before us. She lived in the luxurious house, in the large lordly apartment. She allowed us to live at her, having warned that not longer than for three days. When after long and hard trip, we (hungry and unhappy) came into her apartment, she hold her nose with scented scarf and said 'Oh, what a smell!' She felt neither compassion, nor love for us - nothing except disgust. Certainly, we were in terrible plight and order. All of us got lice during the long way. As for me, I was closely cropped. They spread some ointment over my head (it burned my skin awfully). Later I read Sholom-Aleichem's 'There is no poverty without lice.' [3](#)

Mum began to search of lodging at once. She was a poetic nature. She started searching for apartment near the Summer Garden. [The Summer Garden in Saint Petersburg is the oldest garden of the city: it was founded in 1704 by the architects Leblon, Zemtsov, and Matveev.] And she managed to find a large apartment on the ground floor. Before the Revolution it was a servants' room. The apartment was very damp, moisture oozed directly from walls. We tried to bring order to our new apartment altogether. We, younger girls distracted adults more than helped, but were very proud of ourselves. The true miracle was in the fact that doctor Kopylov whom we came to, lived next door. I still do not know if it was a concurrence or Mum chose apartment for us already knowing his address. Mum, ragged, put silver spoons into a bag, took my hand, and we went to the doctor. I was a tiny and a very thin girl with a big red nose (I had continuous cold). Mum said 'Dear sir, my daughter is in great danger. I am a widow; I have no money, take these spoons and save her!' And she kneeled at his feet. I saw the doctor was near to melt into tears. He lifted Mum from her knees and said 'Madam, calm down. Bring your daughter here immediately.' I ran home to bring Slava. The doctor examined her at home and said 'We will save her leg.' He operated my sister and her leg was saved. Before the operation he invited Professor Vreden for medical consultation. [Professor Vreden (1867-1934) was a well known Soviet surgeon-orthopedist. In 1906 he founded the first orthopedic institute in Russia and became its director.]

Doctor Vreden was well-known, but he also took part in Slava's destiny. Of course doctor Kopylov refused to take those spoons. He even felt hurt and said 'Madam, I am a genuine doctor, I am obliged to save people, and money is of no importance.' Soon Kopylov died. I remember magnificent ceremony of his funeral. I burst out sobbing, and nobody could understand what relative of him I was. He was in coffin, and I shouted 'Dear doctor, thank you very much for our Slava!' Now we understand what kind of doctors worked at that time! They made no difference between life of a beggar, an unknown girl from province and life of eminent and rich patient.

So our life went on. After successful operation that saved Slava's leg, it became clear that we came to Petrograd not in vain. Soon my sister Annette went to school. Once she told me 'Do you know that everything we write and speak consists of 33 letters?' I did not believe her. For a long time she tried to convince me of it. Her words shocked me. I could not imagine that some day I would be able to read.

In our family only Shura and Slava (elder sisters) worked. Shura worked at cardboard factory. They made boxes there. Slava also worked nearby. Her work was very dangerous for the person who had been operated on recently. She soaped wine bottles at the wine factory: all days long she spent in a damp room standing on the stone floor. Shura and Slava kept the house. They cooked, washed, and ironed for all members of our family. They worked and studied at rabfak [4](#).

## Growing up

Certainly I consider Petrograd-Leningrad to be the city of my childhood. Do not forget that though we lodged in the awful apartment, it was situated in the most beautiful place of our city. We realized the beauty which surrounded us; it was unconscious, but clear. We even bowed our thanks to the beautiful. It was a special ceremony: I composed verses, beautifully wrote it down, and we buried that sheet of paper in the Summer Garden.

Entrance to our apartment was made directly from archway. In the apartment there were 3 rooms and 2 big store-rooms. The first room was occupied by Slava, the second one belonged to Shura, and Mum, Zhenya, Annette and I lived in the third room. We took pieces of our furniture from the scrap-heap. Stove heating in our apartment was arranged in a very strange way: the only stove was situated in the corridor, therefore it was awfully cold in the apartment. In winter we all moved to one room and used to sleep in one bed lying across. At first we lived in real poverty. In winter Annette and I went out by turns: we had only one set of warm clothes. I already told you about our game Meckalka, i.e. our dreams. So, there was a dream (second important after father's raising from the dead) to find a treasure of sweets to feast right royally. But at home we never had sweets.

We did not celebrate Jewish holidays and did not observe tradition. Mum probably knew when it was necessary to celebrate holidays, but she never spoke about it. I do not know any Jewish family which observed tradition. I guess that those who observed it, preferred to hold their tongue.

I know nothing about the Jewish community of Leningrad of that time. Moreover, when I became a student of the Leningrad College of Physical Culture named after Lesgaft [it was founded in 1896], I sometimes went there by tram. I say sometimes, because not always I had money for it. And so, many years later I got to know that the tram stop was a few steps away from the synagogue, but I had not a slightest idea about it.



And now I am going to surprise you. We had nothing in our apartment, we had meals not every day, and our clothes could gain sympathy of a hard-hearted person, but we always had books. These books appeared through the efforts of our silent and patient Mum. One day she came home and said 'My dear daughters, today I had not enough money to buy bread for all of us, therefore I bought this cheap book instead.' So that was the way books began to appear. We used to gather under an unshaded lamp and read aloud by turns. Zhenya was the best reader. To tell the truth, she tried to read with expression in her voice, but not always it helped to find sense. Till now I remember her phrase 'At the patient's bed there sat a nurd.' She wanted to say nurse, but failed. It was impossible to laugh at her. In that case she stopped reading and was able to hit the laughter across his face.

This joint reading is one of my dearest memoirs. It was a substitution for entertainments, and often for supper. We liked to buy sets of NIVA magazine. [NIVA was a Russian weekly illustrated magazine for family reading in 1870-1918, editors used to publish works of many Russian and foreign writers there: it added to popularity of the magazine.]

One day a person selling NIVA magazines near the secondhand bookshop gave us a set of magazines free-of-charge. He said 'Madam, the way your girl is looking at my books makes me throw away a chance to earn money.' Do you know, what is interesting? My Mum always wore bad and awfully bad dresses, but nevertheless people always called her madam. Her extraordinary nobleness always shined through her rags. We did not subscribe for any newspapers: we had no money. Annette and I were school library readers.

My sister was my best friend. I also made friends with a Jewish girl Raya. Her family lived on the third floor of our house. Her mother Rose was a dressmaker. She taught my sister to sew. After Annette started sewing for us, we looked much better.

At the age of 8 I went to school. But soon that school was closed (I do not remember the reason). I found a new school on my own; it was situated far away, but in a very beautiful building. I had to cross 3 busy streets, including one with a tram-line. Nobody took into his head the idea to accompany me there: I was so independent that it was beyond my endurance. One day on my way to school I stopped feasting my eyes upon a beautiful ancient church. I came to myself only when the tram driver jumped out of his cabin and tried to pull me down from tram-line tweaking my ears. He used bad language, and I asked him 'Guv, do you think that baron Munhgauzen hung himself on this bell tower?' [Baron Munhgauzen is a hero of Adventures of Baron Munhgauzen novel by E. Raspe.] His answer was a little bit unexpected 'All barons were shot down during the Revolution.'

At school I made many friends: I was a very sociable girl. At school we did not care who of us was Jewish and who not. But in our court yard everything was different. Once Maruska, a neighbor (a little girl of my age) heard me singing a romance Cornflowers, Cornflowers. [Cornflowers, Cornflowers was a popular petty-bourgeois romance in the middle of the 19th century.]

She shouted 'Cornflowers, Cornflowers - and you are a dirty Jew!' I heard this word for the first time in my life; I was surprised and answered 'You are wrong, I am Sonina.' I went home to ask my Mum about that new surname. Mum said that she would explain the details later, when I grew older. She also said that there were different nationalities and that noses like mine were typical only for Jews, but it was not a shame. Mum advised me to say Maruska that she behaved like a swine. For my mild Mum that word was the most abusive she could ever say. After that when we were playing

lapta, Maruska was jealous of my adroitness and I recalled that I was Jewish. According to my Mum's advice I said 'The dirty Jew catches ball very well, and the swine is not able to do it.'

In our house there lived good people: for instance, Semen Fomich and his wife Nastya. He was a person of remarkable kindness and selflessness. During blockade [5](#) he made runners and fixed a huge container on them. All inhabitants of our house used it to carry water from the Neva River. He did not survive the blockade, but his wife Nastya came through it.

When I was in the fourth form, I changed my school for another one which was nearer to our house. My friend and neighbor Raya was my classmate. She always had her lunch with her, and she was generous enough to share it with me. I was the poorest in our class and never accepted anything from anybody, but for some reason I took Raya's food easily.

They say 'Childhood, childhood, our happy childhood.' But you know I do not want to return to my childhood. Do you remember Sholom-Aleichem's 'Well, what for has God created bugs?' I remember my elder sisters struggling against bugs in our beds and lice in our hair! Until now I recollect with horror the moment when a pupil on duty at our school said to our teacher in presence of my classmates 'And Sonina has lice.' Poverty and starvation are always accompanied by lice. Every evening Mum said 'Children, let me look at your heads.' She started combing insects out from our hair by means of fine-tooth comb. No, I do not want that sort of childhood!

I studied at school 8 years. There I hated mathematics, physics and chemistry. But at the College it was necessary to learn chemistry, and I found it to be very interesting, because at that time I already knew the purpose to study it.

I liked literature, history, social science. We had a very good teacher of history. During breaks I always attacked him with different questions: sometimes he even had no time to have a drink of tea. I also was very interested in natural sciences: I guess taking care of people always was my second nature. You know, I am very glad that during the war I had to work in a hospital. The point is not only that I helped people, contributing to our victory over fascists. It was very interesting for me to do work there.

Starting from my 1st class I appeared on school stage every holiday: I recited poetry, danced, and sang songs. At that time beggars went from house to house singing doleful romances. Their texts used to be only for grown-ups, but I remembered them immediately and copied with pleasure. I even derived benefit from it. There was a bakery next door to us in a basement, where they baked wafers. They used to sell wafers filled with ice cream. Both ice-cream and wafers were absolutely prohibitive delicacy for us. The only thing we could afford were cuttings of wafers which they sold at a very low price. It was necessary to come with a clean pillowcase to get those cuttings. Well, workers of that bakery adored me, because I sang and danced for them. They called me a little Gipsy and gave me a lot of wafer cuttings. All children from our house considered it to be great success to go for wafers together with me. The only thing that confused me was laughing of my spectators: I sang so touching songs... Mum knew about my success and decided to develop my abilities and found children's drama school for me. Children aged from 12 till 16 studied there. They had 3 departments: for musicians, singers, and theater fans. I entered theatrical one. They taught us very well: I mastered basics of my future profession. They also gave us some food. There I heard strange words 'Today you will have an omelette.' I had no idea about it, and thought that it was a sort of punishment. But they brought a huge frying pan with fried eggs. I brought a piece of



it to Mum. She turned away from me to the window and began crying. I was a little girl, but I understood at once, why she was crying. I heard her unvoiced words 'I did not want my children to have such childhood.' At the studio I have been studying for three years.

When I recall days of my childhood I understand that the most part of my life was occupied by reading. I used to read till dark, sitting on the window-sill, using daylight up to the last ray. I remember myself sitting on the window-sill with a book (as usual) and our neighbor, father of my friend Raya passing by. He used to say 'Oh, Vera you are standing guard! Hi, Vera!' You know, I read much, but I was never boring. I used to arrange children's performances right in our dreadful, damp, cold and poor apartment. All children from our court yard were spectators, and we were actors (Raya and me). Raya had fiery red hair. She usually played roles of clowns. I liked to play the role of a street cleaner (I fixed a beard to my chin). Texts were also written by me. In spite of her hysterical features, Shura never forbade our performances. And in case Slava came home before the end of our performance, she dismissed all of us saying 'Everyone out!' At that time I did not understand how tired she was, and considered her to be heartless. I never was a member of any club, and was never interested in politics. It was enough for me to study at school and be engaged in my drama school. We never went anywhere to have a rest. We had no idea about going to a restaurant. For the first time in my life I went by train when we moved from Smolensk to Petrograd. I do not remember any car trips. Going by tram was a profusion. I remember that one cold winter day sirens wailed out and car drivers sounded their horns. Mum said that Lenin died [6](#). It produced no impression upon me.

Now I'll tell you about my sisters. My elder sister was Alexandra, everyone called her Shura. Her Jewish name was Sara-Rose. She was born in 1908 in Zaporozhye. She had a magnificent mop of fair hair. Shura was a hysterical girl. She sometimes beat us until she stopped with pain in her hands. And then she embraced us and started wailing 'Oh you, our poor orphans!' She studied at the evening faculty of some economic college. I do not remember where she worked after graduation from her College. She died during the siege of Leningrad. My brother-in-law, Zhenya's husband was at the Leningrad front and saw Shura shortly before her death. All my life I felt unhappy about the fact that Shura died, thinking that I was not alive. You see, I was in Kishinev, when the war burst out and had no connection with my relatives during a long period of time. Shura was never married.

My next sister was Slava, her Jewish name was Sliva. She was born in 1910 in Zaporozhye. She died of brain cancer. I guess it happened in 1960s. She was operated, but after the operation she managed to live not long. She wanted to become an electrical engineer, but right at that time Stalin said that our country needed textile-workers. And she entered a Textile College. I never saw such wonderful smile as of hers. In compare with Shura, her character was different. I can judge by punishments she imposed upon us: no shouts, no hysterics, one strong spat on the face and the punished girl was sent into a dark corridor. I was so much afraid of it that felt spasms thinking about it. Above all I was afraid of darkness. Slava had a husband. I hated him. His name was Boris Leytes. He was from Smolensk by origin. He did not manage to join our family: Mum felt embarrassed and never came out of her room when he visited us. It seems to me that Slava did not love him. She married him because she felt shy with strangers because of scars on her leg (after operation). I guess she married the first person who asked her. Their daughter Rita lives in Israel now. I do not remember when she was born. Rita has got 2 children: a daughter and a son.

My third sister was Eugenia (Zhenya), her Jewish name was Genye. She was born in 1912. She got married very early and gave birth to a daughter Bela. I can not recollect what her profession was. Her husband was a very good person; we all loved him very much. Until now I call him in mind and cry bitter tears. His name was Vladimir Alexandrovich Lebedev. He was a professional military. He lived near to us. After marriage Zhenya moved there. I helped them a lot after their daughter was born: I spent nights at them and awakened Zhenya who had to breast-feed her child, but could never wake up in time. Zhenya died recently (in 2000).

My fourth sister, my favorite sister and friend was Annette, a blue-eyed angel. Her Jewish name was Dane-Ite. She was born in 1916. When Shura beat us, I shouted twice more for both myself and Annette: she never let out a cry, only shed large tears. I cried 'Do not dare to beat my Annette, beat me.' When I recollect it, my life seems to me a mixture of Sholom-Aleichem and Dostoevsky [7](#). Annette did not manage to enter a college, she finished Hydrological Technical School. She was assigned to work in Karelia, in Kondopoga. There she married Tochilin, a chief engineer. He was ill with pulmonary tuberculosis. Annette got infection from him and came back to Leningrad to die. Here she died on my hands. It happened in 1946. There was no person closer to me than her. Until her death she was extremely afraid to infect me: she did not permit anybody to use her tableware. She also tried to serve herself till her last days.

And the fifth sister, the last one called by the members of our family 'a little finger', was me - Vera. My Jewish name was Dobe-Dveyre.

I already told you that my elder sisters lived hard life. Our Mum did not manage to master housekeeping in the inhuman atmosphere we lived in. She was able to cook, but she needed good products, and we had almost nothing. She said 'I'm not able to cook your broth.' Sisters cooked, washed, and sewed, or rather repaired old clothes.

When I finished my school, my childhood (not easy childhood) terminated also. I started working. But I already worked part-time, being a schoolgirl. We made envelopes for an envelope workshop. I made all my friends sit down at the table and organized the process. Most difficult for me was to keep still for a moment, therefore I brought material for envelopes from the workshop, gave the task, counted envelopes, carried our production back to the workshop. One more: I decided that it was easier to work with a song, so I kept a check on everybody singing.

My work after school was also connected with envelopes. Shura worked in an institution, which was engaged in dispatching of huge amount of some materials. They needed a person for packing those materials in envelopes. It was me, whom they put on to do that job. I had surprisingly adroit hands. I worked faster, than two my colleagues. One of these colleagues used to take herself hundreds of envelopes that were packed by me. And I did not dare to tell anybody about it, because I was very much afraid to lose my work. There I worked during 2 years. My salary was crummy, but for our family every kopeck was important.

All the time I was interested in theatre and in everything connected with it. I had no money to buy tickets. But I kept in touch with my former friends of drama school, and they told me all theatrical news. That was the way I got to know about admission to the studio at the Theatre for Young Spectators. [State Theatre for Young Spectators in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) is one of the oldest children's theatres of Russia. It was founded in 1922.] The studio prepared actors, mainly for children's theatres. I went there to participate in casting. And you remember that I was very short,

slim, and big-nosed. They considered me to be apt for travesty. They gave me scholarship of 16 rubles, and I gave up my job. Simultaneously I entered a studio for adults (Sladkopevtsev, an actor was its director). [Vladimir Sladkopevtsev, an actor was born in 1876 and died in 1957.]

They got to know about it in the studio at the Theater for Young Spectators. They did not like it - that is why I had to leave the studio. Then I decided to enter Theatrical College. [The Leningrad College of Theater, Music and Cinematography (nowadays Theatrical Academy) was founded in 1918 as School of Actor's Skill.] For some reason it seemed to me that I was too young for that purpose. That was why I forged my age in the passport without hesitation. At the College there was large entry. Before the entrance examinations entrants had to pass through creative selection (it consisted of 3 tests). I happily reached the third test, but at that moment they found out that I had forged my passport and immediately kicked me out. So I got nothing and looked like a fool. But fortune is variant: I met a remarkable person. A year before that, Pauline Conner, an American dancer came to our city. She opened a dancing school in Leningrad. And I got to know that she invited extra students. Total number of students was planned to be 8. Rector of the Leningrad College of Physical Culture named after Lesgaft (his surname was Zelikson) put a gym hall for her disposal. The hall was amazing! There were mirrors and ballet railings on the walls - the hall was equipped according to high standard. Besides me, all schoolgirls were students of the College of Physical Culture (gymnasts).

We (newcomers) began to study together with those girls who had already studied a year. It was difficult, but of paramount interest. Unfortunately we studied with that remarkable ballet dancer only a year. Stalin decided to expel all foreign experts from the USSR. Pauline Conner also left our country. By the way, when she was going to visit cold Russia, she took several fur coats with her. All these fur coats she dealt out to her senior schoolgirls, therefore no fur coats fell to our share. But the point was not in fur coats: we lost our dear friend and a remarkable teacher. At the same time rector Zelikson was dismissed. His post was occupied by a person named Nikiforov. Nikiforov helped us very much. We, students of Pauline Conner were absolutely depressed, we did not know what to do. And the new director took us in. We became students of the gymnastics department. It happened in 1936.

Our curriculum was very extensive. We studied both anatomy and physiology, and even chemistry. I liked these subjects very much (even chemistry!) and helped everybody to prepare for examinations. Our teachers said 'If you want to get a good mark, go to Sonina.' After graduation I was invited to work at the Faculty of Physiology. But I refused, because I wanted to get practical experience. Then they asked me where I wanted to go (according to mandatory job assignment [8](#)) to teach physical culture. I did not want to leave Leningrad, and kicking over the traces I poked my finger into a map at random. My finger hit Syktyvkar. I was horrified and hid myself, waiting. They started calling me by phone, reminding that I was waited for in Syktyvkar. And in 1941 the Day of Physical Culturist had to be celebrated already for the third time in Moscow. All Soviet Republics had to send their representatives to Moscow. The main parade was planned for June 22 [9](#). I participated in two previous parades being a student, and remembered well their pomposity. We marched in step with music of Shostakovich, wearing black bathing suits with red wings.

## During the war

From participation in these parades I had two main memoirs. The parade took place in the Red Square. [Red Square is the main square of Moscow.] Participants had to march by Lenin's mausoleum. They forbade us to laugh and even to smile 100 meters before we reached mausoleum and 100 meters after it. I also remember very tasty meals we were given there. My hungry childhood left me interested in tasty meal until death. So after another call from Syktyvkar, the College received an order to send some graduate to Moldova to prepare Moldavian athletes for the parade. As I was the only graduate still staying in Leningrad, they decided to send me. I went to Kishinev. But it appeared to be not so simple. First of all, I went there by plane (and it was for the first time in my life!). For some reason the plane landed in Odessa at a small airport. Till now I remember air in Odessa: fragrant with the delicate scents of heady grass and sea. The pilots felt sorry for me and decided to take me to Kishinev by a small two-seater. It made me so sick! But nevertheless all the time I was looking through the window, bewitched by unfamiliar and fine southern landscapes. My pilot decided to amuse me singing Ukrainian songs. There was nothing special in it and I would have forgotten that song if it did not appear to be prophetic. The song told about a Cossack leaving for the front line. His going away was a sore grief to his beloved. She gave him a scarf to have his eyes covered if he would be killed. Do not forget that it happened on June 14, 1941!

Well, I reached Kishinev and began preparing local athletes for the great event - parade in the Red Square. Basically I taught them dancing. Knowledge I got from Pauline Conner was useful. I lived there like in paradise. I never saw so much food. People used to leave leftovers (for instance white bread!) on their plates! Sometimes they even threw bread away (terrific!). It seemed to me real blasphemy. And what markets, what wonderful fruit they had! One day during my training session a boy ran in and shouted 'Teacher, a bomb fell down over there!' I said 'Easy, easy, it is alarm for instruction.' You see, in Leningrad they often arranged alarms for instruction and occupied citizens by civil defence studies. Later another boy brought the same message. And then we heard Molotov's speech by radio [10](#). No doubt: war burst out! I felt responsible for my students and arranged the procedure of sending them home (in fact in Kishinev they gathered athletes from all over Moldova). Then I decided to go to a military registration and enlistment office. [Military registration and enlistment offices in the USSR and in Russia implemented official call-up plans.] Right away I asked them to send me to the front line: I could not imagine another way to live during the war time.

They told me 'We are not able to waste our time talking to a woman. You should go to Leningrad, to the place of your registration.' One of my colleagues (a Moldavian) took me to the railway station. A lot of trains went through Kishinev; all of them were overcrowded - it was a real mess. As for me, I already did not care where to go, I only wanted to change. My friend seized me by the collar and pushed me into the moving train. I fell down on heads of other passengers, but nobody grumbled. The train arrived to Odessa. There I went to a local military registration and enlistment office again. They were glad to see me and said that as far as I was a graduate of the College of Physical Culture, they directed me to the military hospital #411. Injured people were already taken to that hospital. My position was called a nurse, but in fact I did a lot of different work, necessary for the hospital. I both cleaned wards and assisted during operations. I managed to apply knowledge received at my College. I knew both anatomy and traumatology; I was able to make complex bandaging. I mastered all medical procedures very quickly and easily learnt names of medical instruments. I was lucky to work together with a remarkable doctor and a noble person -

professor Ghinkovskiy. During the first operation professor Ginkovskiy whispered to the second surgeon 'And does the newcomer know the instruments?' And he got the following answer 'Better than anyone!'

Soon Odessa suffered from bombardment. The hospital was evacuated. After a long way we found ourselves in Samarkand. I asked to send me to the front line. But director of our hospital put me to shame. He explained me that at bottom of fact hospital was a front line and that I had to stay where I could make myself useful. So I became thoroughly engrossed in my work. I elaborated rehabilitation system for casualties. I ran my training sessions to music. They gave me a pianist, and she appeared to be my countrywoman. She was also born in Zaporozhye and evacuated to Samarkand. We made close friends. By the way, my method of rehabilitation awaked interest of doctors from the 1st Leningrad Medical College, which was evacuated to Samarkand, too. These doctors came to our hospital, and were present at my training sessions. Try to imagine, how proud I was! I worked 24 hours a day, almost without sleeping, and I never felt tired. All my feelings were replaced by feeling of great sympathy to those wounded men. Before their discharge wounded persons appeared before the special commission which decided what to do: send them to the front line or demobilize. I was a member of that commission. The truth is that twice I played a cunning trick. Two wounded persons had limited mobility of arms after deep wounds. By means of my method I was able to rehabilitate their arms. But one of them had 6 children and the other one - 5. They were not very young any more. I told the commission that those cases were long uncared-for and that those men would never be able to shoot. And I told the truth to those wounded persons. I said that the front line would not grow poor because of the loss of 2 soldiers, it would be better for them to bring up their children. I received letters from them (from their native villages) for a long time.

In the hospital they gave us not so much food, but it was of good quality, they gave us meat once a week. They paid us salary, to tell the truth, very small. Suddenly I received a letter from my sister Annette. She found me by a miracle. She had been evacuated to the Urals.

Later I received a letter from the Leningrad Theatrical College (from Tomsk, where the College had been evacuated). Serebryakov, director of the College wrote to our hospital that Sonina Vera Markovna, a teacher of physical culture must leave for Tomsk (to the College). I took that letter and went to the military registration and enlistment office again. I said 'Either you send me to the front line or I go to Tomsk.' - 'Front line is not interested in women', they answered. - 'Go to your College.' It happened in 1944. I reached Tomsk and began to study at the Theatrical College (they did not stop studies in evacuation). I entered the second course. Later together with my College we moved to Novosibirsk, and then (already almost at the end of war) returned to Leningrad. We celebrated Victory Day already in Leningrad.

## After the war

Our apartment appeared to be occupied, that was why they placed at my disposal only one room there. And I told you already that our apartment was awful: very damp, moisture oozed directly from walls. Suddenly I was suggested to move to another room in our house, but on the second floor. The room was very sunny. It was about 7 square meters, very long, like a gut. So I moved there. In my tiny room there lived my friends (whose living conditions were even worse than that of mine) from the College, and later from the Theatre. I continued to study. I graduated from the



College in 1949 and started working in the Theatre for Young Spectators. A. Bryantsev was its director. [Alexander Bryantsev (1883-1961) - founder, actor, and director of the Theater for Young Spectators.] He was a remarkable person, talented and brave. I'll tell you about his courage a little bit later. In the Theatre for Young Spectators I worked about 27 years. That period was very happy for me. A. Raykin himself invited me to his theater. [Arkady Raykin (1911-1987) - a famous Russian actor, master of dramatic identification, a compere, performer of monologues, feuilletons, sketches.] But I could not leave Bryantsev. I admired him. He used to bring to perfection even the most insignificant role in a crowd scene. He made no distinction between actors; all of them were equally dear and interesting to him. Here I'll tell you a story, which shows his character much better than my words. In the Theatre for Young Spectators there were 2 remarkable actors: Teykh and Freindlich. They were Germans. And during the war the Theatre was in evacuation. At the end of the war Leningrad theatres began to come back from evacuation. But the Theatre for Young Spectators was not allowed to come back. Authorities said that its staff could come, but without Teykh and Freindlich: after the end of the war Leningrad needed no Germans. But Bryantsev himself went to Moscow. Here you have to take into consideration that it was rather dangerous to intercede for Germans at that time! I do not know what higher echelons Bryantsev visited in Moscow, what words he found, but the Theatre was allowed to return to its native city. To tell the truth, Freindlich immediately left for Alexandrinsky Theatre, expressing no thanks to Bryantsev. The point was that Alexandrinsky Theatre had academic status and salaries were higher there. But Teykh said 'While Bryantsev is alive, I will not leave his theatre.'

After that I taught callisthenics at courses for coaches. Later I worked at a House of Culture teaching dancing. [Houses of culture in the USSR were large establishments with various forms of cultural and educational activities: exhibitions, dancing parties, various circles and studios.] I do not work only 5 years. My last place of work was at school no.214 [11](#). I worked there 8 years as an elocutionist, conducting a studio. I guess that the main result I achieved there was attraction of my pupils to good literature, to verses. They won different competitions, traveled all over Russia free-of-charge. Five of them visit me until now. Each time they tell me so kind words that I feel uncomfortable to repeat them. But they also say sad things: their intelligence and love to verses differs them from their coevals very much, people call them *rara avis*. And I answer that they can be proud of such a title. I think that this kind of people will possibly help to rise all educated people here, and they will be able to turn our life for the better.

Last two years I live in the House of Veterans of the Stage. I like everything here, but I lack activities. I have already asked managers of our House to find some children or young people whom I can teach dramatic reading.

While I worked in the Theatre, I went for vacation in recreation centers every year [12](#). Most often I went to the Black sea. I had the second sports category in swimming and spent hours in water!

When Stalin died, I sobbed madly. Now I am ashamed of myself. And at that time they gave me a role at the Theater (I do not remember what exactly); I only remember that it required make-up very difficult for realization. At our College they taught us basics of make-up: our teacher was Andrey Andreevich Bersenev, a remarkable expert. We often ran to him for consultation (since the Theatre was located near the College across the road). So I came to him and he helped me with that make-up. But at the end of my visit they said by the radio that Stalin had died. I burst in tears, and my make-up came to nothing. Andrey Andreevich shouted at me 'What happened, as a matter



of fact?! It doesn't matter that someone died somewhere! You are an actress and you have a complex make-up, do not pay attention to nonsense!' It was effective to sober me down.

I remember Doctors' Plot very well [13](#). At that time I already worked at the Theatre. There was an actor of heroic type. He appeared to be a terrible Anti-Semite. Together with him we played in the play Raven by Ghocci. According to the play, I had to lie at his feet. And so, right during a rehearsal he started shouting in presence of all actors 'It serves you right, Jews! We see what you want! You have in your head idea to destroy Russian people!' Absolute silence established. I curled myself up into a balloon on the floor and could not raise my head. I could not understand what feelings prevailed in my heart: fear or disgust. At that moment A. Bryantsev was present there. For the first and the last time in my life I saw him losing his temper. He turned white and began to tremble. He tapped the floor with his stick. And his voice pealed louder than voice of that actor Anti-Semite 'Never say these words at my theatre! Get out of here, get out of the theatre!' That was the way real Russian intellectuals behaved.

Certainly I was very pleased with changes [14](#) in our country. If people decide for themselves what to read and what to listen, they feel like human beings. Living behind the Iron Curtain [15](#) is not pleasant. Now everyone can go wherever they want. It seems great, but actually it is normal. Of course our life is not easy, salaries and pensions are crummy, but I hope that everything will become normal step by step. Anyway I am glad that lived to witness the events I witnessed.

My attitude towards such events as Hungarian revolution [16](#), Prague spring [17](#) was already normal, i.e. I condemned actions of our country. Military victories of Israel [18, 19] pleased me: it seemed to me that truth and justice were on the side of Israel, not Arabs.

Falling of the Berlin wall also pleased me. [Berlin wall was erected in 1961 to divide Western part of Berlin from the Eastern one. It was destroyed in 1989. It was symbolical that its concrete was used to construct highways of the united Germany.] It is impossible to divide people of the same nationality in such a forced way.

I am connected to the Jewish community of St. Petersburg basically through the Hesed Welfare Center [20](#). For holidays I receive food packages from them. Thanks to them, I always have matzah for Pesach.

## Glossary:

### [1](#) Russian Revolution of 1917

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

### [2](#) Pogroms in Ukraine

In the 1920s there were many anti-Semitic gangs in Ukraine. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

### **3 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

### **4 Rabfak (Rabochiy Fakultet - Workers' Faculty in Russian)**

Established by the Soviet power usually at colleges or universities, these were educational institutions for young people without secondary education. Many of them worked beside studying. Graduates of Rabfaks had an opportunity to enter university without exams

### **5 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.

### **6 Lenin (1870-1924)**

Pseudonym of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the Russian Communist leader. A profound student of Marxism, and a revolutionary in the 1890s. He became the leader of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party, whom he led to power in the coup d'état of 25th October 1917. Lenin became head of the Soviet state and retained this post until his death.

### **7 Dostoevsky, Fyodor (1821-1881)**

Russian novelist, journalist and short-story writer whose psychological penetration into the human soul had a profound influence on the 20th century novel. His novels anticipated many of the ideas of Nietzsche and Freud. Dostoevsky's novels contain many autobiographical elements, but ultimately they deal with moral and philosophical issues. He presented interacting characters with contrasting views or ideas about freedom of choice, socialism, atheisms, good and evil, happiness and so forth

### **8 Mandatory job assignment in the USSR**

Graduates of higher educational institutions had to complete a mandatory 2-year job assignment

issued by the institution from which they graduated. After finishing this assignment young people were allowed to get employment at their discretion in any town or organization

## **9 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.

## **10 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.

## **11 School #**

Schools had numbers and not names. It was part of the policy of the state. They were all state schools and were all supposed to be identical.

## **12 Recreation Centers in the USSR**

trade unions of many enterprises and public organizations in the USSR constructed recreation centers, rest homes, and children's health improvement centers, where employees could take a vacation paying 10 percent of the actual total cost of such stays. In theory each employee could take one such vacation per year, but in reality there were no sufficient numbers of vouchers for such vacations, and they were mostly available only for the management.

## **13 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.

## **14 Perestroika (Russian for restructuring)**

Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s, associated with the name of Soviet politician Mikhail Gorbachev. The term designated the attempts 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 democratize the Communist Party organization. By 1991, perestroika was declining and was soon eclipsed by the dissolution of the USSR.

## **15 Iron Curtain**

A term popularized by Sir Winston Churchill in a speech in 1946. He used it to designate the Soviet Union's consolidation of its grip over Eastern Europe. The phrase denoted the separation of East and West during the Cold War, which placed the totalitarian states of the Soviet bloc behind an 'Iron Curtain'. The fall of the Iron Curtain corresponds to the period of perestroika in the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, and the democratization of Eastern Europe beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## **16 1956**

It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **17 Prague Spring**

The term Prague Spring designates the liberalization period in communist-ruled Czechoslovakia between 1967-1969. In 1967 Alexander Dubcek became the head of the Czech Communist Party and promoted ideas of 'socialism with a human face', i.e. with more personal freedom and freedom of the press, and the rehabilitation of victims of Stalinism. In August 1968 Soviet troops, along with contingents from Poland, East Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria, occupied Prague and put an end to the reforms

**18 Six-Day-War:** The first strikes of the Six-Day-War happened on 5th June 1967 by the Israeli Air Force. The entire war only lasted 132 hours and 30 minutes. The fighting on the Egyptian side only lasted four days, while fighting on the Jordanian side lasted three. Despite the short length of the war, this was one of the most dramatic and devastating wars ever fought between Israel and all of the Arab nations. This war resulted in a depression that lasted for many years after it ended. The Six-Day-War increased tension between the Arab nations and the Western World because of the change in mentalities and political orientations of the Arab nations.

**19 Yom Kippur War:** The Arab-Israeli War of 1973, also known as the Yom Kippur War or the Ramadan War, was a war between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other side. It was the fourth major military confrontation between Israel and the Arab states. The war lasted for three weeks: it started on 6th October 1973 and ended on 22nd October on the Syrian front and on 26th October on the Egyptian front.

## **20 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint, Hesed helps Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.