

# Sima Libman

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Tallinn

Estonia

Interviewer: Emma Gofman

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*I first met Sima Libman in her small cozy two-room apartment. I saw a small old woman with bright eyes. I found her to be a friendly and talkative person with a good sense of humor. While Sima and I were talking her granddaughters called several times to discuss their problems with her. Later, I saw Sima among the people who attended the general assembly of the Estonian Jewish Community. From the outside I could see that she walked with difficulty but I never heard her complaining about her health, and the conversation we had was a pleasant and interesting one.*



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## My family background

I heard from my father, Elhanon Rogovski that my paternal great-grandfather had come from Poland, which was then part of the Russian Empire. My great-grandfather's name was Zelik Rogovski. When he was twelve years old he became a Cantonist [1](#), and served in the tsarist army at the age of 18. After 25 years of service my great-grandfather had the status of Nikolayevsky soldier [2](#) and could therefore settle anywhere within the Russian Empire. He chose Estonia, which was outside the Jewish Pale of Settlement [3](#), as the place of his residence and in the early 1860s he settled in the small Estonian town of Rakvere. His children were born there. I don't know how many children Zelik Rogovski had: I can only tell you about two of his sons. There was Meier Rogovski who was born in 1867. He lived in Tallinn and was a highly respected person. For many years he was the chief rabbi of the Tallinn Synagogue.

Besides that, between the 1920s and 1940s, Meier Rogovski was a stock holder of the Jewish Bank in Estonia. I remember what he looked like: a tall grey-haired interesting-looking man. He always wore a top hat and carried a walking stick. When World War II began his two daughters and their families moved to the back areas, but Meier Rogovski, his wife Chase, and their son Aron remained in Tallinn. The fascists killed them in September 1941. The second son in my great-grandfather's family was my paternal grandfather, Benyamin Rogovski. He was born in the mid-1860s.

Unfortunately, I know very little about my grandfather as he died a few years after I was born: I don't remember him at all. He was an artisan, perhaps, a shoemaker and lived in Rakvere his whole life. From his first marriage he had five children: three sons and two daughters. My father was the youngest in the family. My paternal grandmother's name was Leah [nee Pats].

In the 19th century the large Pats family lived in Pskov [today Russia], then some of them moved to St. Petersburg [today Russia], and some to Estonia. My grandmother's sister, Beile Chapkovski, lived in Tallinn with her husband. Her brother, Abram Pats, first lived in Rakvere and then in Tartu. He had three children: Yakov, Zelda, and Pesach. Their descendants now live in Estonia and Israel.

In 1903, Grandmother Leah fell ill, she was treated in a hospital in Tallinn, but the doctors couldn't help her and she died. She was buried in Tallinn at the Jewish cemetery. My father was only five years old then and my grandmother's sister, Beile Chapkovski, adopted him. She didn't have any children of her own and her family brought up my father as their own son. After his wife's death, Grandfather Benyamin still lived in Rakvere with the rest of his children. The family was poor and my grandfather couldn't pay for his children to be well-educated. Yiddish was the language spoken in that family.

My father's eldest sister's name was Anna. She studied in a Russian gymnasium in Rakvere and finished eight or nine grades. Anna married Faivel Migdal, who was a real estate agent. They lived in Tallinn and were well-off. Aunt Anna considered herself an urban lady: she never spoke Yiddish, mainly Russian. Their son's name was Gedalye Migdal. He went to a German school, but in 1933 when the fascists came to power in Germany, all Jewish students had to leave the school. Gedalye spent his last school year in a Jewish gymnasium. After that, he graduated from the Department of Chemistry of the Tallinn Polytechnic Institute. When World War II began, Gedalye worked as an engineer at a chemical factory in a small Estonian town called Kivioli [130 km east of Tallinn].

At the beginning of July 1941 it was rumored that German troops had landed in the woods somewhere near Kivioli. Local authorities quickly assembled a self-defense group and sent it to the woods to capture the invaders. Gedalye was in this group. He always dressed well and on that day he wore a leather coat and a pair of box calf boots. So the Red Army soldiers mistook him for a German spy and shot him dead. His parents found out about their son's death only after the war as they had evacuated in early July 1941. After the war, Aunt Anna and her husband lived in Tallinn and died in the 1960s.

Sheina Mitzevendler [nee Rogovski] was my father's second sister. She acquired little education; I believe she only finished elementary school. Her husband was a hat-maker, he had a workshop in Tallinn and made good money. He was particularly good at making uniform caps and galloons on army epaulettes. Aunt Sheina was a housewife. They had two daughters. One of the daughters, Ezia, married a Latvian in the 1930s and went to live somewhere in Europe. Later, she moved to the USA and lived there for a long time and died there. The other daughter, Zelda, now lives in the

USA with her son's family. Aunt Sheina died before World War II. My father also had a brother, Aro-Benye Rogovski. He didn't have much education either: in fact, he didn't have a vocation. He lived in Tallinn with his family, did various odd jobs and owned a trade business for some time. He had a wife, Esther, two daughters, Rachel and Sarah, and a son, Zelik.

During the war, Uncle Aro-Benye was enlisted in the Labor Army [4](#) and died there. Zelik, his son, fought in the Estonian Rifle Corps [5](#) and died in combat action. Esther, Rachel, and Sarah were in evacuation in the Ural region [today Russia] and returned to Tallinn after the war. Sarah was one year older than me and we were close friends, she was a wonderful person. Unfortunately, she died at the age of 65 after a very serious illness. Rachel died at the beginning of 2004. She lived in Finland with her daughter's family.

Out of all of my father's relatives, his brother Joseph Rogovski was my favorite person. He was very talented. When he was young he strove to get as much education as he could. My grandfather couldn't afford to help him so Uncle Joseph had to make his own way. He studied, and worked, and then studied again. During the [Estonian] War of Liberation [6](#), Uncle Joseph volunteered to the Estonian Army, and wounded his leg. He limped for the rest of his life. In the late 1920s, he graduated from Tartu University and became a certified pharmacist. After that, he and his wife, Pesya, lived on the small Estonian island of Vormsi for two years where Uncle Joseph worked as a pharmacist. Later, they went back to Rakvere, and Uncle Joseph opened his own drugstore with Pesya's father's help. In 1931, they had a daughter, Leah, and in 1935, a son, Benyamin. In 1940, the drugstore was nationalized, and Uncle Joseph was appointed the sanitary inspector for Narva. During the war, Uncle Joseph was evacuated to Chuvashia [a region in central Russia, in the middle of Volga valley]. After the war they returned to Estonia and lived in Parnu where Uncle Joseph worked as a sanitary inspector until he retired. He died in the late 1970s. His son, Benyamin, now lives in Israel with his family, and his daughter, Leah, lives in Tallinn. She worked as an engineer at a large factory for many years and is now retired. Unfortunately, she is very ill now.

When all his children became independent, Grandfather Benyamin married a widow with a young child and they had a daughter, Rebecca, in 1917. She was a beautiful girl, adored by all the relatives and especially by my father. Rebecca graduated from a German gymnasium in Rakvere and went to live in Tallinn. By that time Grandfather Benyamin had died, but his brother, Meier Rogovski, helped Rebecca to get a job at the Jewish Bank. Since then, she has always worked in finances and was a very good accountant. Rebecca married in 1939 and had a daughter, Sheina, in April 1941. During the war, Rebecca and her daughter were evacuated to the Urals, and her husband fought in the Estonian Rifle Corps. After the war, they all returned to Tallinn, and in fall 1945, when Rebecca gave birth to another daughter, Yana, her husband suddenly died of meningitis. Later, she remarried and had a son, Boris Khalupovich. In 1987, Boris went to live in the USA and Rebecca, Sheina and Yana followed later with their families. Rebecca is still alive. I sometimes talk to her on the phone and write letters.

My father always recalled his aunt, Beile Chapkovski, and her husband who took the place of his parents with gratitude. They were deeply religious people: often attended the synagogue, didn't work on Sabbath, and strictly ate only kosher food. They also celebrated Sabbath and all Jewish holidays according to the traditions of Judaism. The Chapkovski family spoke only Yiddish. Aunt Beile could speak little Russian and Estonian. Her husband was a kind person, but his life ended tragically. There was a small square in front of the Tallinn Synagogue [7](#) with several stalls which

sold sweets, lemonade, and various trinkets. The Chapkovskis owned one of these stalls. One evening, just before closing time, two thieves entered the booth, killed Aunt Beile's husband with an axe, and took the little money he had. This happened in 1925. Prior to that, everything was fine. The Chapkovskis helped my father to acquire a good vocation. Upon finishing nine years at a Russian gymnasium he studied under Rokhlin, an excellent old Tallinn dental mechanic. After he finished his studies, my father was tested by a special examining board and received a document which enabled him to work as a dental mechanic. Later, he worked with several dentists who treated patients in their offices and passed their orders to my father. He completed the orders at home where he had a small lab.

When my father was still a schoolboy he went to visit his mother's relatives in St. Petersburg during his summer vacation. He had a lot of relatives in St. Petersburg, all of them members of the Pats family. While he was visiting a family of some of his distant relatives my father met a girl named Sofia Beilis. My father was 14 then and Sofia was just twelve. That's when they fell in love. Every year my father went to spend at least a week in St. Petersburg in order to see Sofia. The last time he visited was in the summer of 1917. At that time they finally agreed to marry when my father started working independently, but due to circumstances they had to wait a further six years.

My mother, Sofia Beilis, was born in 1900 in Yamburg, Petersburg province [today Kingisepp, Leningrad region in Russia]. Her father, Joseph Beilis, was a good military tailor. He made uniforms and overcoats for top officials in the Russian army. In the mid-1900s, in regard to Joseph's high qualification as a tailor and, therefore, his usefulness, he was given permission to settle in St. Petersburg along with his family. My grandfather rented a basement near the city center, engaged several workers, and opened a workshop. His family lived next to the workshop. My grandfather could have come from Ukraine because Mendel Beilis, whose name stirred entire Russia from 1911 to 1913 [see Beilis case] [8](#), was his distant relative. My mother recalled that they had a large photograph in their room with Mendel's portrait in the center and his lawyers' portraits on the sides.

My mother's mother, Lyuba Beilis [nee Pats], was born in Pskov [today Russia], in 1880. After she married Joseph Beilis she lived in Yamburg. My grandmother had five children: my mother was the eldest. Next was another daughter, Panya [1902], then a son, Semyon [1905], and then Emma [1909] and Eugenia [1911]. They were all born in St. Petersburg. My grandparents spoke good Russian and Yiddish, but since their children went to a Russian school they used Russian in their family. However, my grandparents spoke only Yiddish to each other. Their family always observed the kashrut, Sabbath, and all Jewish holidays. My grandmother was a good housewife. She was good at preparing Jewish cuisine: she could cook traditional Jewish meals, and taught her daughters to do the same. She always made her own clothes: her children were always dressed well, and after my grandfather died, she earned a living by making clothes.

My grandmother was a determined person. When World War II began, Uncle Semyon and Aunt Emma's husband went to the front, but the women and children stayed in Leningrad and didn't know what to do. It was my grandmother who made the right decision then: she took all her children and grandchildren from Leningrad to Urzhum, Kirov region [today Russia], where her youngest daughter, Eugenia, lived. All of them returned to Leningrad after the war except my grandmother who died in Urzhum in 1943. Aunt Eugenia married twice before the war. From her first marriage she has a son, Joseph Turevski. He lives in Moldova now. Eugenia's second husband,

whose last name was Rosanov, was a professional army officer. Before the war he was appointed chief of the military school in Urzhum, but when the war began he went to the front and was killed. Eugenia and her children remained in Urzhum after the war. From her second marriage she has two children: her son, Mikhail Rosanov, who now lives in Israel, and her daughter, Tamara, who lives in Urzhum.

Semyon, my mother's brother, was a very interesting person. He was good-looking, cheerful, and very sociable: he could play the guitar and sing well. He always worked in sales: as a store clerk at first, and then as a manager. During the war, Uncle Semyon was in the army and fought at the Leningrad front. After the war, he returned to Leningrad to his family. Uncle Semyon used to say jokingly that his wife, Leah, gave him an expensive present every ten years: a new daughter. Two of his daughters, Inessa [born in 1928] and Lyubov [born in 1948], now live in St. Petersburg, and the third, Renata [born in 1938] died in 2003. Uncle Semyon was a very caring father. It so happened that his wife died when his youngest daughter was only seven years old. Uncle Semyon didn't remarry. He brought up his daughter by himself and later lived with her family until his death. Their family was very hospitable: I loved staying with them when visiting Leningrad. Uncle Semyon died in the late 1960s.

Aunt Emma's husband died in combat action. After the war she lived in Leningrad with her son and worked at a Leningrad chess club as a secretary. Aunt Emma died in the early 1980s: her son and his family moved to Israel in the early 1990s.

My mother's third sister, Panya, lived in Leningrad, worked in a shop, and died in 1964.

In summer 1917, when my parents' engagement took place, a number of very important events happened: The October Revolution [see Russian Revolution of 1917] [9](#) and the Civil War [10](#) in Russia, the Estonian War of Liberation, and Estonian Independence [11](#). My parents found themselves at opposite sides of the border. They wrote letters to each other and eagerly waited for a chance to meet. My mother forwarded several petitions to be allowed to visit her fiancé in Estonia but every request was denied. It was only in spring 1923 that she was permitted to visit her relatives in Estonia for a short period. My mother traveled to Tallinn and, naturally, didn't return to the USSR. Later, in the 1930s, she really wanted to see her relatives in Leningrad but wasn't allowed in. She did see her brother and sister after World War II, but her parents weren't alive then.

## Growing up

My parents got married on 28th June 1923. The wedding ceremony took place in the synagogue in Rakvere, where Grandfather Benyamin lived. At that time my father lived in Tallinn with Aunt Beile and her husband in a small apartment near the synagogue. It was the area where many Jewish families rented cheap apartments. The streets were narrow with mostly one-storied wooden buildings which were heated by stoves and had only electricity and running water facilities. Now these streets aren't there any more: everything has been rebuilt. In 1923, my father brought his newlywed wife into Aunt Beile's small apartment. I was born there in 1924. After my uncle died, we moved into a more spacious apartment in a different building, two-storied this time. We occupied the entire first floor, and our Estonian landlord lived on the second one. We had a large front room, a kitchen, a dining-room, a bedroom, and Aunt Beile's room. She lived with us all the time, and I called her 'grandma.'



When my mother arrived in Estonia she could only speak Russian. So Russian was my first language. As my mother talked to Grandmother Beile while at home, she was soon able to speak Yiddish: she had heard it spoken in her family from a young age. Later, she could understand and speak Estonian to servants and shop-keepers. I laughed when I heard her Estonian.

When I was four and a half years old, my parents hired a German governess for me so that I could learn German. This was the trend in Estonia at that time. She would come around noon and take me for a walk: we read books and played while speaking German only. At night she put me to bed and left. I forgot my Russian and started speaking German well: it's always easier when you're a child. Later, I studied German in school, and I can still speak, read, and write German. When I was five years old, I was sent to a Jewish kindergarten. I was there from 9am to 2pm when my governess would pick me up. During breakfast the children took turns helping in the dining-room by setting out the dishes and cleaning up afterwards. Our teacher, Madame Dubovski, who my parents became friends with later, used to recall how I would refuse to do the dining room duty and explained to everyone in German that I would have servants do this for me when I grew up.

Yiddish was the language spoken in my kindergarten. There were Hebrew kindergartens as well, but my father acknowledged only Yiddish: he was a hard-line Yiddishist [12](#), but Joseph, his brother, held on to Zionist views. Whenever Uncle Joseph visited Tallinn he stayed at our place, and then my father and he would argue loudly discussing Jewish issues. They would chase each other around our large round table and shout. When my mother heard these shouts in the kitchen, she ran in, stamped her little foot, shook her ladle at them, and said sternly, 'Enough!' Then they would calm down. Fortunately, neither my father nor Uncle Joseph was a part of any political organization so they weren't subsequently subjected to repressions.

I started going to school early, at the age of six and a half years: this was what I wanted. It happened in 1930. The Jewish school I went to was nearby. My class was small: we were taught all the subjects in Yiddish. Classes where subjects were taught in Hebrew were much more numerous. Base Schneeberg was the name of the teacher who taught us from first to fourth grade. From fifth grade onwards we studied languages: Estonian, German, and Hebrew. We were not too serious about Hebrew. We had a few lessons and we had no great desire to study it anyway. Influenced by our Yiddishist parents we considered Yiddish the true Jewish language. Students who were taught in Hebrew didn't want to study Yiddish. Of course, there were families where both Russian and German were spoken. The school used a unified national curriculum, but our textbooks were in Yiddish. They were printed in Vilno in Poland [today Vilnius, Lithuania].

From a very young age, since my kindergarten years, I loved performing: I recited poems, sang, and acted in plays. There were plenty of chances to perform in school: end of school year, special parent nights, and various celebrations. The Jewish holidays which our school always celebrated were Purim and Chanukkah. For Purim we had fancy-dress balls, and for Chanukkah we did concerts, where I always performed. Other holidays were celebrated at home. Our school was secular. We knew all religious traditions, but there was no religious trend. The Hebrew classes had Tannakh lessons, but we didn't. There was a cheder at the school. Some boys, who wanted to study the Torah, remained in school after lessons, and a rabbi conducted their lessons. There was no yeshivah in Estonia.

My parents weren't too religious but they believed that Jewish families had to observe Jewish traditions. While Grandmother Beile was alive, our household observed the kashrut strictly: we bought only kosher meat, we had separate dishes for meat and dairy, even the towels which we used to wipe the dishes were separate. After Grandmother Beile died in 1936, a strict kosher household was no longer observed. My mother didn't want to mess with the separate plates and towels, but still she never bought any pork. We always spent Sabbath at home. On Fridays, my mother thoroughly cleaned our apartment and cooked special meals for the next day, and Grandmother Beile baked challot. At night, when the entire family gathered at the table, my grandmother lit the candles and said the prayers. After my grandmother died, my mother carried on the tradition.

My father never prayed at home and never attended the synagogue on Saturdays. Only on holidays our whole family went to the synagogue together. Before the war we had a beautiful synagogue: just about all the Jews in Tallinn would go there for the festive prayers. In the synagogue there was an excellent male choir conducted by cantor Jossel Gurevitsch. Of all the holidays we celebrated at home, I do remember Pesach and seder. A special plate set, which was kept packed away in a box for the rest of the year, was finally put on the table. During seder, my father sat reclining among the cushions, posing as a free man. Aunt Anna and her family always came to our house for this celebration. Her family was secular: they didn't celebrate Jewish holidays at home.

My parents were very sociable people: especially my father. He was a very witty and cheerful person. They both loved being around people, visited friends often, and their friends visited us. Our home was open to people. My father was a kind and caring person. He adored me and my sister. It was he, not our mother, who woke us up in the morning and sent us to school. If my sister and I had problems at school or out in the yard we ran to our father for help. My mother was much more severe. I remember one incident which occurred when I was seven or eight. My mother and I were invited to some friend's house and it turned out that I had grown out of all my pretty summer dresses. So my mother took one of her dresses, which was beautiful but a bit old, and made it into a very pretty dress for me overnight. My father didn't earn much in those days, and my mother had to make my dresses herself although she didn't like doing it. The next morning, while my mother was getting dressed, I went outside in my nice new dress, climbed a fence, and tore it. I ran back to my mother crying. She didn't say a word, but got hold of the collar and ripped the dress apart from top to bottom. She must have been very upset.

My mother knew how to dress inexpensively but fashionably and elegantly. She invented her own designs for dresses and suits. Sometimes she used her old clothes, combining them with new material. As a result she obtained some very elegant clothes, and her lady friends thought that she had bought them from an expensive tailor.

My mother was an energetic person, she loved being around people and participated in all kinds of events. While I was still in elementary school, my mother was always elected for the school's governing committee where she worked very hard. In our school we had a small lunchroom, and during lunch break we could buy things like pastries, biscuits, or lemonade there. There was a long table in the hallway on the second floor where tea was sold from a samovar. Some ladies from the governing committee were always on duty in the lunchroom and kept order. My mother was often on duty. Both my parents were active members of the Byalik [13](#) Society: a Tallinn Jewish Society for Culture and Education. It was a secular organization: a kind of club. My father was a board

member there.

The society rented a section of a large building, which isn't in existence now. There were a number of hobby groups there: a drama group, a sports club, a choir, a youth group, etc. When my father was young he could act on stage. He was said to have been a talented actor. While still in secondary school and after his graduation, my father performed for the local Russian drama society and later for a Russian amateur theatre. He was part of the drama group in the Byalik Society and performed plays in Yiddish. One of the rooms rented by the Society was a large auditorium with a stage which was used for performances, concerts, and celebrations. The society had a good, nearly professional, large choir that sang at various events: it had actually been invited to sing for the Estonian Radio. Soloists from the Estonia Opera Theater would often visit the concerts to sing with the choir. The songs were either in Yiddish, Russian, or Estonian. Perhaps, they also sang in Ivrit, I don't remember exactly. On one occasion my parents traveled to Riga [today Latvia] accompanying the choir on its concert tour: they were the choir's constant admirers but didn't sing themselves. There was also a Society library which contained many books in Yiddish, Russian, and Estonian. My parents read a lot, mainly in Russian. I borrowed Yiddish books from the library. We didn't have a library of our own at home, and the papers my father subscribed to were in Russian and Estonian.

During holidays, the Byalik Society held dance parties. We had fancy-dress balls for Purim, there were always balls for Rosh Hashanah and for the general New Year. My mother prepared and organized these parties. Before the event she and some other lady members would visit owners of factories or workshops and ask them for donations to have a lottery or an auction. My mother was acquainted with the Jewish owners and they never said no to her. For instance, one of them, Ginovker, a chocolate factory owner, always donated boxes and packs of chocolates free of charge. Ratner, a fur workshop owner, donated some inexpensive fur items. Then my mother organized lotteries and auctions at the holiday events. Once she won a prize herself: a beautiful cushion made of fur and satin strips.

I didn't participate in hobby groups at school, but I was a member of the Byalik Society youth group since I was twelve. I was part of the drama group where we staged children's plays. I did gymnastics and played ping-pong. Once a week we would get together to have a discussion. The subjects were mostly cultural: on Jewish authors, artists, or musicians. We also discussed political events. I remember we discussed the Reichstag fire, persecution of Jews in Germany, fascism, and the invasion of Poland [14](#). We also discussed these things within our family: my parents, especially my father, were very worried. This is why later on, when the war began, we went into evacuation without any hesitation.

In 1929, my father spent a month in Austria going through an advanced training course for dental mechanics. Naturally, he paid all the expenses from his own funds. Our entire family went to the port to see him off and later to meet him: it was a big event for us. My father took a boat from Tallinn to Germany and then a train to Vienna. Later, in the mid 1930s, my parents spent several days in Helsinki [today Finland]. Apart from these trips, my parents never went abroad as they couldn't afford it.

My younger sister was born in 1933. She was named Leah in memory of our father's mother. According to Jewish tradition, the first daughter is named after her maternal grandmother, and the



second one after her paternal grandmother. When I was born, my mother's mother was still alive, and a child can't be named after a living relative, so I was named after my mother's grandmother. Her name was Simhe, but my name was recorded in a more modern manner: Sima. Leah was a happy and obedient child, and everyone in the family adored her. As an infant she had poor health, she had pneumonia several times and the doctors recommended that she spent summers away from the sea. So we rented a summer house in Hiiu, near Tallinn, for several summers. The house was in the middle of a pine forest: it was supposed to be good for her lungs. My sister, my mother, and I lived there, and my father came there every evening. Before that period, my mother and I went to the countryside every summer.

To make it more fun, several Jewish families would get together, pick a nice spot at the seaside or lake shore, rent an inexpensive place and have a good time. My mother and I would usually spend two months there, and my father would manage a two or three week holiday and join us. Grandmother Beile remained in Tallinn to have her rest away from us. Our whole family spent two wonderful summers on Vormsi island when Uncle Joseph worked there as a pharmacist. That was in 1929 and 1930. There was a Swedish hotel on the island where we lived, but we visited Uncle Joseph and Aunt Pesya every day. There were amazing surroundings untouched by civilization, and beautiful forests full of mushrooms and berries.

My parents didn't discuss the family's financial matters in front me, but I think our economic situation began to improve from the mid-1930s. In 1938, we moved into a new comfortable apartment. It had central heating, an electric stove, and parquet flooring in every room. There were three rooms: a dining room, a bedroom, and a nursery. In the process of construction, the owner altered the apartment layout at my parents' request, discarding the servant's room and part of the kitchen to make space for my father's study. We already had a servant at that time, but she came in the morning, helped my mother around the kitchen, and then left in the afternoon. We didn't spend our summers in the country any more, but went to local resorts instead. We spent the summers of 1938 and 1939 in Haapsalu where my mother took mud-bath treatment for her legs, and in 1940 we went to Parnu.

## **The soviet invasion of the Balkans**

A few days after my sister was born, my mother and I went to Parnu. We received a telephone call from my father who sounded very anxious. 'Come at once! We are being turned out of our apartment.' We returned to Tallinn immediately and learned that Soviet troops had entered Estonia and our house would be occupied by the families of Soviet officers [see Estonia in 1939-1940] [15](#). We had three days to vacate our apartment. In panic, my parents searched for another apartment and found what we had always had before: a three-room apartment in a wooden building with stove heating. However, soon we were told that three rooms was too much space for us and a young couple was accommodated in one of the rooms. The man wore a civil suit, but the woman rarely came out of the room, which surprised my mother a lot. My father continued working. Our Jewish gymnasium was renamed 'Secondary School #13.' I was in my last year of school and intended to go on to study at the medical department of the University of Tartu. Classes which were taught in Yiddish and Ivrit were combined. The classes were taught only in Yiddish as Ivrit was outlawed. The Byalik Society and other Jewish organizations were closed.

## **During the war**

The one year that we lived under Soviet government went by fast. On 7th June 1941, I received my secondary school graduation diploma. The day before was my father's birthday, so we had a double celebration at home. Two weeks later, I was going to submit my application to Tartu University but then the war began. German forces were quickly approaching Estonia's southern borders and we realized that we had to go into Soviet back areas. When my father was young he had pulmonary tuberculosis, and although it was cured his lungs remained weak. That's why my father wasn't subject to military service. Still, it took him a lot of effort to obtain a permit to evacuate. We started packing up and I realized that my parents were very impractical. I was just 17 years old but I knew better than my mother what things we had to take with us. If I hadn't argued with my mother and had my own way we would have found ourselves in evacuation without bare necessities and with a bunch of useless things. Besides, everybody thought that the war wouldn't last long and we would return in two or three months to find our apartments just as we had left them. That's why my father didn't take his dental tools and materials, my mother also left her sewing machine behind. After three years, when we returned to Tallinn, we couldn't find any of our belongings.

On 4th July 1941, our family left Tallinn and traveled east. We had been assigned to Ulyanovsk [today Russia]. We traveled in a goods wagon with other Jewish, Russian, and Estonian families. There were about 30 people in our wagon. We were lucky because a military store was being evacuated on the same train and we could buy our food from it. We never got to Ulyanovsk because our train was rerouted to go over the Urals. On one occasion I was almost left behind though at the last minute I managed to hop on the footboard of the last wagon. I had to stand there holding tight for hours until the train stopped again. That was when we were crossing the Urals range and the view was spectacular: the night, mountains, and extremely bright stars. The impression was so strong that years later when I was anesthetized and operated on I saw those mountains and stars again.

We traveled for 15 days and finally arrived at the station of Dalmatovo [today Russia]. This is a small town in Kurgan region, 160 kilometers east of Sverdlovsk [today Yekaterinburg]. The food which was still left in the military store was given away to the evacuees. My mother got a large chunk of pickled lard. She didn't know what to do with it, because we didn't eat pork. For some reason, my mother didn't dare to just give it to anyone but left it at the station, shoving it underneath some lumber. All who had been evacuated were assigned to kolkhozes [16](#). We went to the village of Ashurkovo [today Russia] and were given a vacant house. Apart from our family, two teachers from our Jewish school lived in this house. We all worked in the kolkhoz, out in the hayfields. Lunch was taken for everyone to the fields.

In September, I went to Sverdlovsk to study in a medical institute. I was accepted and given accommodation in the dorm. But my Russian wasn't good enough and I understood very little at the lectures, especially in anatomy. I tried translating the lectures into Yiddish and Estonian: my anatomy teacher gave me a textbook in German. Still, I didn't do well and was hopelessly behind in my class. Then we were sent to the country to help out with potato harvesting. I had no warm clothes and caught a bad cold. I wrote to my father telling him how miserable I was and he came for me at once. I returned to Ashurkovo but there was no work and no food. When cattle were butchered at the kolkhoz, kolkhozniks and evacuees were given the entrails and everyone was very happy with this. Nobody thought about kosher any more. I persuaded my parents to move to

Dalmatovo. We rented a room there and survived by exchanging our things for food. Soon Israel Dubovski, a friend of our family who had arrived in Dalmatovo with his wife before us, introduced my father to his neighbor. His neighbor turned out to be a dental mechanic, too. He was an old Jew from Moscow [today Russia] who, unlike my father, had brought all his tools along with him.

My father and he went to the local hospital and offered to open a dental surgery there using their own tools and materials. The hospital's head physician liked the proposal and the surgery was soon opened. In this way, my father got work, a small salary, and most importantly, a worker's ration card. Using it, he could get 400 grams of bread daily for himself and 250 grams more for each of us, non-workers. The hospital also provided us with a plot of land outside the town where we grew potatoes. Then I found a job. In Chelyabinsk [today Russia] there was a representation office of the Estonian Soviet Republic [see Estonian Government in Evacuation] [17](#) which dealt with affairs of evacuated Estonian residents. One of its representatives, an Estonian whose last name was Ilmatalu, worked in Dalmatovo. I was his secretary. I didn't receive any salary, but I had a worker's ration card. In fall 1942, Ilmatalu sent me to the village of Novoseltsevo, 40 kilometers away from Dalmatovo. A number of evacuated Estonian families lived in Novoseltsevo and the representation office opened an Estonian elementary school there. For the first three months an Estonian girl and I taught all the subjects in this school.

Later, when the real teachers arrived, I returned to Dalmatovo. I walked 40 kilometers each way because there was no transportation. In Dalmatovo I had two friends of the same age as I: Jette Gleser and Sarah Rogovski, my cousin. We were young and tried to live interesting lives regardless of the hardships and disorder. All three of us often went to dance at a former monastery where officers' refresher courses took place. There was no electricity in Dalmatovo: a homemade oil lamp was used to light the large monastery hall where we danced with young lieutenants to accordion music. Madame Dubovski, my former kindergarten teacher, and Israel Dubovski, her husband, were active people and spoke good Russian. They set up a drama club in Dalmatovo School, where Israel Dubovski taught mathematics. My sister Leah played the lead part in one of the club's best productions, a fairy tale titled 'Alenki tsvetochek' [Scarlet Flower]. The club took this production to a festival of amateur theatricals in Kurgan [today Russia]. Jette Gleser and I also went to the festival with a beautiful dance, which we had prepared based on artistic gymnastics. Before the war, Jette and I did gymnastics for many years at the Maccabi [18](#) club. Both the fairy tale production and our dance were awarded festival diplomas.

In the middle of 1943, the Estonian representation sent me to Uglich [200 km from Moscow] to take a bankers' training course. They were training specialists to work in the Baltic Soviet republics after the war. I was 19 then and I could speak much better Russian so I wasn't scared of the 1,500 kilometer journey. After taking the course I returned to Dalmatovo and worked at a local branch of the State Bank. At the beginning of 1944, I received a call from the evacuated Estonian government. I was summoned to Moscow and sent to the offices of the USSR State Bank for a probation period. I stayed in a hotel, spent my days studying manuals and other financial documents, and in the evenings visited theaters and receptions at the Estonian representation office. A relative of mine, Zeldia Pats, who worked for the Party, lived in Moscow at that time and we often met.

## **After the war**

In May I was summoned to Leningrad. At that time, the Soviet Army had already entered Estonia, so the government of the Estonian Soviet Republic had been stationed nearby, in Leningrad. It occupied the large Oktyabrskaya hotel, where specialists for various government institutions of the future Soviet Estonia were staying. I was assigned to the Ministry of Finance, given a hotel room, and provided with food coupons and a scholarship. Until Tallinn was liberated I was to work in one of the branches of the Leningrad Bank. After I had some time to look around I went to a representative of the Ministry of Health and obtained an invitation letter for my father.

My parents were going through a very hard period at that time. My father didn't have a job any more because his colleague had gone back to Moscow, taking his tools with him. In order to get a ration card, my mother went to work at a sewing cartel. My father's lungs got worse. With great difficulty, having sold all they had, my mother managed to nurse him back to health.

In late August 1944, he came to Leningrad. Leah and my mother arrived a few weeks later. At my request they received a good room in our hotel and stayed there for a week. As soon as Tallinn was free, my parents and Leah went there. At that time, I had a job of putting archived documents in order, so I didn't go to Tallinn until 4th November 1944. We had two rooms in a large apartment which was shared by two other families. My father began work as a dental mechanic in a state-owned dental laboratory, and I obtained the post of a credit inspector in the State Bank. Leah started her sixth year in the Russian school #19 [19](#), and our mother stayed at home. My parents' friends, the Dubovski family, also returned to Tallinn and lived in a communal apartment [20](#).

One of the families sharing their apartment was the Jewish Bahmat family. The head of the house, Isaac Bahmat, used to be an inspector in our Jewish gymnasium before the war, and prior to that he had been a school administrator in Valga. In fall 1945, the Dubovskis invited our family to their home. During our visit, Madame Bahmat peeked in and invited everyone to have some tea and home-made pie. Visiting them just at the same time was a very good-looking young man. He was Simon Libman, their friend from pre-war Valga. Later, I realized that this meeting didn't happen by accident: it had been set up by Madame Dubovski and Madame Bahmat. Simon and I started seeing each other. It turned out he lived just across the street from us. Simon was twelve years older than me and I liked it. I didn't like men of my own age, they all seemed too childish. Simon was born in Valga into a large and once very prosperous Jewish family. He finished a German elementary school in Valga, then an Estonian secondary school, and then he entered Tartu University in 1932 to study economics. Simon's father used to own several houses and large shops in Valga but went bankrupt in the mid-1930s.

Simon's two elder sisters, Rasse and Sofia, were already married by then, and his youngest sister, Martha, still lived with her parents. Simon and his younger brother, Abi, went to university at the same time. Abi studied Judaics. Being the elder brother, Simon decided to abandon his studies and started working so that his younger brother would have a chance to complete his education. Simon joined a lumber-trading company and worked as a manager until 1941. During this period, Abi Libman, who was a very clever person, graduated from university with a master's degree.

The advent of Soviet power in 1940 went smoothly for the Libman family because they had nothing which could be taken away from them. As the war began, they managed to leave and go into evacuation but as they were traveling their father died. The train approached Yaroslavl [today Russia] and they all got off, found a Jewish cemetery and buried him according to Jewish traditions.

Simon's mother and sisters lived in Tajikistan during the war while Simon and Abi fought in the Estonian Rifle Corps participating in action near Velikiye Luki [today Russia]. Both of them were officers and they both joined the Communist Party when on the battle-front. After the war, Abi Libman taught the history of the Communist Party in the Party School [21](#) in Tallinn.

In 1952, when the anti-Semitic campaign was under way in the Soviet Union [see campaign against 'cosmopolitans'] [22](#), Abi Libman was said to be a master of Judaics in bourgeois Estonia. Because of this he was expelled from the Party and discharged from work. For the next several years he worked at a furniture factory. Then Abi was reinstated in the Party and he continued teaching Party history and Marxist philosophy in colleges for many years. Abi Libman had the status of a professor and a doctorate in history.

My husband, Simon Libman, could speak Russian, German, and Estonian fluently and they often used him as an interpreter in the Estonian Rifle Corps. When the war was about to end he was assigned to work as a translator at an Army Prosecutor's Office in Leningrad. After the war Simon served one more year in the Estonian Corps in Tallinn. In 1946, he was demobilized and assigned to the Department of Visas and Registration in the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When we met he was just getting his discharge from the Army. I dated Simon for several months, and then he went to my parents to ask for my hand. On my birthday party on 29th March 1946, with our relatives and friends present, I remember my father stood up and said, 'I'd like to introduce my daughter Sima's fiancé.' Our wedding was to take place on 29th June 1946, because my parents got married on the same day in 1923. At the beginning of May Simon and I went to Valga for a few days: he wanted to introduce me to his family. Living in Valga at that time were his mother and sister Sofia with her family. When we returned to Tallinn, we found out that my father had had a heart attack. He was lying in bed at home and Markovich, a very good physician, visited him daily. My father and he had been good friends since their youth. My father already began getting up again but then had two more heart attacks and died at the end of May. Naturally, Simon and I had no wedding. On 2nd July 1946, we simply had our marriage registered and I went to live with my husband.

My father's death was a great loss to our whole family but especially for my mother. She became a widow at 46 with a young daughter in her care. Leah was just 13 then. My mother was a person completely unaccustomed to independent life. She had no work experience, apart from a few occasions she never had a job in her life. Naturally, Simon and I supported my mother and Leah. We helped her by purchasing a sewing machine and she started making clothes at home. She made blouses, bath robes, children's clothes and sold them at the market. Later, she got a job at a sewing workshop.

In November 1947, I had a son. At first we wanted to name him Elhanon, after my father, but it sounded outdated, and my mother thought of a beautiful name for our baby boy: Elkond. After a year I was going to send our son into daycare and return to work, just like all other Soviet women, but my husband protested. He believed that the child had to be brought up by his mother at home. We could afford this because Simon made good money. He kept on working at the Ministry of Internal Affairs where he was appreciated and given a raise regularly. Our housing was improved as well. In 1948, instead of a small room in a communal apartment, we were offered two nice big rooms in a comfortable six-room apartment. In this new apartment we had only one family sharing it with us, and they were very good and respectable people. A few years later, we redesigned the apartment where we separated two rooms and lived there until 1977.



When Elkond was three I decided that I had stayed home long enough and that I had to go to work. I didn't want to work in a bank again. I was fed up with all those numbers. This wasn't my type of job.

I took my son every summer to Parnu. This place has the warmest sea water along the Estonian coast. I always rented a room from the same landlady. Simon's annual leave was always in winter so he could visit us only on Sundays. Just when I began to give serious thoughts to my returning to work I met Mirjam Kolomoitsev at the Parnu beach: she was a former student of our school.

She had a university degree, worked as a lawyer, and taught at the Tallinn School of Law. When she heard about my problem, Mirjam said, 'You definitely have to study. You have a bright mind! You have to get good qualifications, or you will always get a small pay. Come and study at our School of Law. In two years you will get specialized secondary education and a lawyer's diploma. You will get a monthly scholarship of 500 rubles.' My salary at the bank had been 600 rubles. She also said, 'You will have a two-month holiday every summer. And after you finish the school and start working, you will be able to study for a university degree by correspondence.' I considered her suggestion carefully because a lawyer was my second profession after a doctor. I decided that it wasn't a bad idea at all, but my husband didn't like it. He told me, 'Study in a medical school instead. You will be a nurse and it's a great job for a woman. Didn't you want to work in the area of medicine?' But I wanted to be a doctor, not a nurse! I gave medicine up, which I regretted later.

I submitted my application to the School of Law and was accepted. I managed to place my son in an Estonian kindergarten but it turned out that he wasn't ready for it. Elkond was four at the time but he was too attached to home. At the kindergarten he never cried but stood by the window all day waiting to be taken home. We had to hire a babysitter so he could stay home for one more year. At the age of five he went to the same kindergarten with great pleasure. He actually went to school later than other children, almost at the age of eight, because my husband couldn't bring himself to pull him out of the kindergarten. I proceeded with my studies at the School of Law, finished my first year and half of my second year. What was left was to do a course of practical work and pass the state examinations.

This was the beginning of 1953. Just before I had to start practical work, I was summoned by the school director and told that I wouldn't be allowed to do it because I had hidden the fact that my husband's brother had been expelled from the Party. I couldn't understand what that had to do with me. My husband was fine: he had never been expelled from the Party. The application forms which I had filled didn't contain any questions about my husband's siblings. It was explained to me that the school wasn't just any kind of school but a political and ideological one, and I had displayed my political immaturity. I wasn't allowed to do any practical work and was expelled from the School of Law in February 1953. Later, I gained my end and was permitted to take state examinations. So I received my diploma without doing any practical work. But I couldn't get any employment without an assignment from the School of Law.

One of the teachers who taught at the school was the Minister of Justice at that time. He knew me as a diligent student. I went to his office, explained the situation, and asked him to help me find a job. He refused to help me. I still have my lawyer's diploma, but I have never worked as a lawyer. Two months after I was expelled from the School of Law, my husband was dismissed from office, which was totally unexpected. By then, Stalin had already died, but anti-Semitic policies in the

country lived on, perhaps, mechanically. However, my husband was dismissed fairly: he was discharged from the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the grounds of staff reduction and was paid a large settlement.

In spring 1953 we were both unemployed. Soon after, some friends of mine helped me get a job as a translation secretary at the Ministry of Motor Transport because of my knowledge of Estonian, German, and Russian. I remember how long it took me to translate instructions on road construction from German to Russian, as the text was very difficult with a lot of technical terms. Then it turned out that nobody needed those instructions anyway. I stayed there for one year, then moved to a different organization and worked as a translation secretary again, then switched jobs one more time. I wanted to earn money but in every place I worked I was paid very little. In 1955 I decided to learn a trade and took a job at a hat-making establishment. I learned to make hats and worked as a hat-maker for 20 years.

The city's Party organization directed my husband to work at the committee on measures and weights. Although he didn't have any special qualifications he worked as a lab engineer. The people he worked with were young, happy, and friendly. Simon enjoyed his new job but his pay was very little: four times less than at his former job. We couldn't survive on this kind of income. Simon spent six years working in the lab. During this time he took a half-year extension course in Leningrad and became a senior engineer but his pay changed very little. Finally, in 1960, Simon was transferred into the area of vocational education and was offered the position of director at a sewing vocational school. It took Simon some time to finally dare such a change in his career, as he didn't have any qualifications in education. But he was told, 'You have a wealth of experience in life, and you can certainly manage it!' Indeed, Simon was able to fulfill his job. He was the director of this vocational school for some years and put things in good order there. He was then transferred to the State Committee on Vocational Education to work as the chief of the Supply and Construction Department. He worked in this position until he was 75 and then retired.

I worked as a hat-maker at a Lembitu consumer services center and retired at 55. But just one and a half years later, on my good friend's reference, I got employment at a credit department of a large electronics store. This friend of mine and I worked together preparing paperwork for credit purchases. This work was easy and well-paid. After the Estonian independence was re-established in 1991, the entire commercial system was changed and when the credit department in our store was abolished, I retired for good.

Leah's life didn't turn out easy either. Her early childhood was happy. Leah was a pretty, happy, and kind girl, the youngest in the family. We all adored her, of course. When she was four years old, she went to the same kindergarten that I had gone to. In the kindergarten they spoke Yiddish, outside our house Leah played with Estonian children, and our mother spoke Russian to her at home. So, as a little girl Leah could speak Yiddish, Russian, and Estonian equally well. In 1939, she went to a Jewish gymnasium and studied in a Yiddish-language class. Leah had finished two years of school when the war began. That was when her happy childhood came to an end. The three hungry evacuation years followed.

In Dalmatovo, when our mother brought home bread which our family received from ration cards and started splitting it between us, Leah always sat opposite me. I remember her hungry eyes which she couldn't pull away from the bread. She was still growing up and must have suffered from

hunger more than we, adults, did. While in evacuation, Leah went to a Russian school and did her third, fourth, and fifth grades. She was a good student: just like me, she loved acting, reciting poems, and performing on stage. After our return to Tallinn, Leah went to the Russian secondary school #19 and graduated in 1950 with a silver medal. She was brought up in Russian culture, so after her graduation she went to Leningrad hoping to enter the university there and study history. Of course, she wasn't successful. Because of large competition, she was offered a chance to take all the entrance exams and take part in the general competition, although, being a silver medalist, she was supposed to be accepted without any exams. Leah took offence and applied to the bibliography department of the Leningrad Institute of Culture instead and was accepted immediately. She studied there for four years.

In 1954, Leah called us from Leningrad. She was in tears and I struggled to understand what it was that had happened to her. It turned out that upon her graduation from the Institute she was being assigned to work [see mandatory job assignment in the USSR] [23](#) in Altai [today Russia], 4,000 kilometers from Tallinn. Simon managed to help her: he had many friends in Tallinn and Leah's assignment was changed to Estonia. She returned to Tallinn and lived with our mother and worked as a bibliographer in the Central Library. Later, she taught at a college for librarians. After the college had been moved to the outskirts, Leah was appointed manager of the technical library. Her last work place in Tallinn was the library of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. Leah was an attractive girl: many young men were attracted to her but she didn't like any of them.

In 1964, she met Mr. Right. He was from Moscow, a qualified physicist holding a degree in Physics and Mathematics, and a convinced Zionist. His name was Ephraim Ulanovski. They loved each other intensely, but Ephraim was a married man with a ten-year-old son. He believed he had no moral right to leave his son fatherless. Thus, Leah and he agreed that they would get married and go to Israel after Ephraim's son finished secondary school. They had to wait for eight years. During this entire time, Leah and Ephraim met frequently, exchanged telephone calls, went to visit each other, and always spent their holidays together somewhere at the Black Sea. My mother considered this situation not quite normal and was very concerned about Leah.

Leah and Ephraim got married in 1972. Leah went to live in Moscow and immediately they filed their paperwork for a permit to move to Israel. In spring 1973, their application was denied, and in July 1973, Leah had a son, Nahum. In October 1973, when the Yom Kippur War [24](#) was in progress in Israel, they suddenly received the permit on the condition that they leave within two weeks. Consequently, when the fact that they had a small baby was taken into account, this period was extended to one month. They flew to Israel on 15th November 1973. Leah and Ephraim lived 30 happy years together. They lived in Rehovot, where Ephraim worked at a military factory. Leah didn't work but stayed at home with their son. He grew up to be a handsome young man. Nahum is a qualified physicist just like his father. He graduated from a university with a Doctor's degree. Nahum served for several years in the Israeli Army. Hagit, his wife, is a third generation Israelite: her grandmother came to Palestine from Romania. Hagit is a biologist. She graduated from university and, according to Israeli laws, served in the army. Nahum and Hagit have a little daughter, Shahav. Ephraim died of a heart attack in 2002. Leah still lives in Rehovot. Nahum and his family went to the USA for three years where he is involved in an interesting scientific research project.

After kindergarten, in 1955, Elkond went to Russian school #32. He did very well in elementary school, then a little poorer, but he never had serious problems. Early on, Elkond loved sports: he did rowing and cycling. At the age of 13, he was part of a group of teenagers who did a cycling tour around Estonia.

Our family wasn't religious, but we tried to observe Jewish traditions. At home we celebrated every Jewish holiday, and I often cooked Jewish food, not just on holidays. So our son was aware of his Jewish identity early on, and he never had a complex in this respect. Since my husband and I could both speak Yiddish, Russian, Estonian, and German, at home we used a bit of each language. As a result, Elkond can speak Russian and Estonian fluently and can also understand Yiddish. Elkond was interested in journalism, but Tartu University only educated Estonian journalists, so, upon his graduation from secondary school, he entered the university to study the Russian Language and Literature. His studies were interesting: at that time, a number of prominent scholars, such as Yuri Lotman and others, taught there.

Elkond did well in his studies but was suddenly expelled in his third year. It turned out that he had told the teacher of Marxism and Leninism that he could pass this key university subject without attending the seminars. In response the teacher refused to permit him to take the examination in order to prove the importance of Marxism and Leninism seminars. Immediately after his dismissal, he was drafted into the army. He served in missile forces in Siberia, and came back with much of his hair missing. He still believes he was right and has no regrets of the years lost in the army. After he came back from the army, he returned to university and finished his third year. He was 25 years old and it was time to think about getting a job. At that time, there was a new Russian-language newspaper in Tallinn entitled Vecherni Tallinn [The Evening Tallinn] and Elkond found employment as one of the editorial staff. He continued his university studies by correspondence and worked for this newspaper for quite a long time. He went through every step of the editorial ladder. Later, Elkond worked as a reporter for other Estonian papers and information agencies. At the moment, he is a reporter for the Delovye Vedomosti [Business News] newspaper.

He has been working in the area of journalism for over 30 years now. Elkond also does a lot of translation work, mainly from Estonian into Russian. Our son married late, at 38. He went on a business trip to Tver [today Russia] and met Elena, his future wife, there. She worked in an organization for the protection of ancient monuments and studied history part-time at university. They got married in 1985, had a daughter, Sofia, in 1986, and another daughter, Elizaveta, a year later. Elena never finished her university studies: she works as a proof-reader for a Russian-language newspaper.

My granddaughters spent their first school years at the Tallinn Jewish school. It is a secular school, and the language of instruction is Russian, but Jewish history and traditions are studied extensively and Jewish holidays are celebrated. So the girls know all these things. When Sofia was in her fourth and Elizaveta in her third year, Elkond put them in a Russian school where, he believed, the core subjects were taught better. They have kept many of their friends from the Jewish school and seen them often, and Sofia returned to the Jewish school in her eleventh year. She is going there now in her twelfth year, but Elizaveta still goes to the Russian school. Elena is a Russian Orthodox. Naturally, she wants her children to know Christian traditions, too. So their family celebrates both Jewish and Christian holidays. They all visit me for the Jewish holidays and celebrate the Christian ones at home.

During the Soviet times we had no Jewish social life in Estonia. The only thing was a synagogue which operated in a small old house on the outskirts of Tallinn. Mostly, elderly people attended it. My mother went there often after my father's death. In the early 1960s, during Khrushchev's [25](#) rule, there was a rumor circulating among Jews in Tallinn that Jewish amateur drama and vocal groups were already active in Moscow and authorities didn't oppose to this. Then, a small enthusiastic group got together in Tallinn and decided that it was time to revive Jewish cultural life. Some of those enthusiasts were Meishe Sher, Boris Pasov, and Jakov Pats. They were all raised in a Jewish cultural environment and had taken active parts in Jewish cultural life before the war. I was invited, too, because I knew Yiddish and had taken part in Jewish drama before the war. To begin with, we decided to set up a drama club and produce performances in Yiddish. At that time, many Jewish families in Tallinn still spoke Yiddish and even the children knew it well.

Meishe Sher handled all the organizational and legal part of the job. He was a lawyer and knew exactly which official channels had to be addressed in order to obtain a permit for a Jewish drama club to operate. The principal thing was to get the approval of the city's Communist Party committee. I have no idea how Meishe Sher managed to do this but a few months later, we had an official permit for our activities and a room for rehearsals in the furniture factory club. We asked all our friends and relatives, and found people willing to be a part of our amateur theater. Some of them were Fanny Halbreich, Tsezar Malkin, and Beilinson. They came and were happy to help. For our first production we picked Sholem Aleichem's [26](#) 'Mazl Tov,' a one-act play, and assigned the parts. However, after it barely started it all fell apart because Halbreich broke her leg, Beilinson got sick, and Malkin changed his mind.

We needed a director urgently and found him. He was a young Jewish man from Tartu who had graduated from a drama college in Moscow and worked as a director and actor in the Estonian Drama Theater in Tallinn. His name was Ben Druil, he was a talented man with a true Jewish soul, and this may have been the reason why he agreed to help us immediately. Soon came the opening night of 'Mazl Tov.' I played the part of Beile the cook, and Joseph Shaikevich was my partner. He was born in Ukraine and spoke lovely Yiddish. In the production, he had the part of Rabbi Alter who was in love with Beile the cook. Berta Danzig had the part of the mistress, Avigal Fainstein was her housemaid, and Isaak Beilinson was the clerk who courted the housemaid. The small auditorium where we performed was full of people who wouldn't let us leave the stage afterwards. Those who couldn't be there on the first night demanded a second run. We had singers and musicians who joined us and soon they formed a Jewish women's singing band. So, our second performance, which took place in the Russian Drama Theater of Tallinn, was made up of two parts: the 'Mazl Tov' production in the first part and the singing band in the second. The show was sold out.

Our performances awakened the Estonian Jews. Both young people and adults joined us: some wanted to perform and some just to help out. David Shur, a ballet dancer, set up a Jewish dancing group and Sima Shkop, an artist, drew the stage sets for performances. Everyone worked without pay but with incredible enthusiasm. Whenever we had problems with rooms we rehearsed at somebody's home. And everyone still had their jobs or studies and families to attend to. My family understood what I was doing: my husband and son submitted to the idea that I was busy at the rehearsals in the evenings and on weekends. My mother helped me by making costumes and always cried when watching the performances, as she remembered my father performing in a Jewish theater.



Our theater was in existence for ten years, until 1972. The last several years we rehearsed and performed at the Jaan Toomp Club. We produced 'Der Det' [Divorce], Sholem Aleichem's 'A Doctor,' and Gordin's [27](#) two-act 'Kreuzer Sonata or Across the Ocean'. Our most triumphal work was 'Anne Frank's Diary.' We had to write our own scripts and translate it into Yiddish. The parts were played by both adults and children. Anne Frank's part was played by Inna Gelb and Peter's by Mark Shagal. They were just 14 or 15 years old. Tevje Majotes and I were the Dutch people who were hiding the Frank family. Some other people involved in the production were Lev Hasak, Isaak Beilinson, Julia Beilinson, Enn Krotschek, and Avigal Fainstein. Our theater took this production to Vilnius and Kaunas [today Lithuania]. We had very friendly connections with Jewish amateur groups in Lithuania: we often exchanged concerts and performances. I believe it was because of the work our theater group was doing that many Jews got acquainted with their culture and actually felt Jewish. Young people met each other and even married. In the early 1970s, during the big aliyah most of our actors moved to Israel. Many of our steady viewers left, too. Those actors who remained in Tallinn got together and talked and decided that our task had been completed and the theater should be closed. This decision must have made the Soviet security services very happy. Although we never felt much attention from their side I'm sure our activities were always closely monitored.

The revival of Jewish life in Estonia began in 1988 when the Jewish community was re-established. My mother wasn't alive then: she had died in 1977, but my husband and I became active community members from the start. We attended all the events, meetings, and participated in holiday celebrations. However, soon after this Simon fell seriously ill and died in 1992. Now I still make every effort to attend interesting celebrations and events held by the community. Unfortunately, my health sometimes makes it impossible. Once every month, I always go to our Jewish school where we, former students of the pre-war Jewish gymnasium, have our re-unions. After such meetings I feel both happy and sad.

When my husband was still alive our son's family and we switched apartments because ours was bigger. Now I live alone in a two-room apartment. My son, granddaughters, and daughter-in-law often visit or call me. I know they are always there to help.

## Glossary

### [1](#) Cantonist

The cantonists were Jewish children who were conscripted to military institutions in tsarist Russia with the intention that the conditions in which they were placed would force them to adopt Christianity. Enlistment for the cantonist institutions was most rigorously enforced in the first half of the 19th century. It was abolished in 1856 under Alexander II. Compulsory military service for Jews was introduced in 1827. Jews between the age of 12 and 25 could be drafted and those under 18 were placed in the cantonist units. The Jewish communal authorities were obliged to furnish a certain quota of army recruits. The high quota that was demanded, the severe service conditions, and the knowledge that the conscript would not observe Jewish religious laws and would be cut off from his family, made those liable for conscription try to evade it. Thus, the communal leaders filled the quota from children of the poorest homes.

## **2 Nikolayevsky soldiers**

Jews drafted into military service from 1827 to 1856. The first half of their 25-year term was spent in barracks, and then soldiers were allowed to marry and live in private lodgings while continuing the service. From 1856, the Jews who had served for 25 years were permitted to live anywhere in the Russian Empire instead of returning into the Pale of Settlement.

## **3 Jewish Pale of Settlement**

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

## **4 Labor army**

it was made up of men of call-up age not trusted to carry firearms by the Soviet authorities. Such people were those living on the territories annexed by the USSR in 1940 (Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, parts of Karelia, Bessarabia and northern Bukovina) as well as ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union proper. The labor army was employed for carrying out tough work, in the woods or in mines. During the first winter of the war, 30 percent of those drafted into the labor army died of starvation and hard work. The number of people in the labor army decreased sharply when the larger part of its contingent was transferred to the national Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Corps, created at the beginning of 1942. The remaining labor detachments were maintained up until the end of the war.

## **5 Estonian Rifle Corps**

military unit established in late 1941 as a part of the Soviet Army. The Corps was made up of two rifle divisions. Those signed up for the Estonian Corps by military enlistment offices were ethnic Estonians regardless of their residence within the Soviet Union as well as men of call-up age residing in Estonia before the Soviet occupation (1940). The Corps took part in the bloody battle of Velikiye Luki (December 1942 - January 1943), where it suffered great losses and was sent to the back areas for re-formation and training. In the summer of 1944, the Corps took part in the liberation of Estonia and in March 1945 in the actions on Latvian territory. In 1946, the Corps was disbanded.

## **6 Estonian War of Liberation (1918-1920)**

The Estonian Republic fought on its own territory against Soviet Russia whose troops were advancing from the east. On Latvian territory the Estonian People's Army fought against the Baltic

Landsver's army formed of German volunteers. The War of Liberation ended by the signing of the Tartu Peace Treaty on 2nd February 1920, when Soviet Russia recognized Estonia as an independent state.

## **7 Tallinn Synagogue**

built in 1883 and designed by architect Nikolai Tamm; burnt down completely in 1944.

## **8 Beilis case**

A Jew called M. Beilis was falsely accused of the ritual murder of a Russian boy in Kiev in 1913. This trial was arranged by the tsarist government and the Black Hundred. It provoked protest from all progressive people in Russia and abroad. The jury finally acquitted him.

## **9 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.

## **10 Civil War (1918-1920)**

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

## **11 Estonian Independence**

Estonia was under Russian rule since 1721, when Peter the Great defeated the Swedes and made the area officially a part of Russia. During World War I, after the collapse of the tsarist regime, Estonia was partly conquered by the German army. After the German capitulation (November 11, 1918) the Estonians succeeded in founding their own state, and on February 2, 1920 the Treaty of Tartu was concluded between independent Estonia and Russia. Estonia remained independent until 1940.

## **12 Yiddishists**

They were Jewish intellectuals who repudiated Hebrew as a dead language and considered Yiddish the language of the Jewish people. They promoted Yiddish literature, Yiddish education and

culture.

### **13 Byalik, Haim Nahman(1873-1934) was a major Jewish author of poetry, fiction, and sociopolitical literature**

He wrote in Ivrit and translated some of his works into Yiddish. He did Ivrit translations of Servantes' and Schiller's work. He lived and worked in Israel from 1924.

### **14 Invasion of Poland**

The German attack of Poland on 1stSeptember 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1stSeptember 1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1stSeptember, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rdSeptember, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

### **15 Estonia in 1939-1940**

on September 24, 1939, Moscow demanded that Estonia make available military bases for the Red Army units. On June 16, Moscow issued an ultimatum insisting on the change of government and the right of occupation of Estonia. On June 17, Estonia accepted the provisions and ceased to exist de facto, becoming Estonian Soviet Republic within USSR.

### **16 Kolkhoz**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

### **17 Estonian Government in Evacuation**

Both, the Government of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party were created in 1940 and were evacuated to Moscow as the war started. Their task was to provide for Estonian residents who had been evacuated or drafted into the labor army. They succeeded in restoring life and work conditions of many evacuees. Former leaders of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic took active part in the formation of the Estonian Rifle Corps assisting the transfer of former Estonian citizens from the labor army into the Corps. At the beginning of 1944, top authority institutions of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic were moved to Leningrad, and the permanent Estonian representation office remained in Moscow. In

September 1944, Estonia was re-established as part of the USSR and the Estonian government moved to Tallinn.

## **18 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.

## **19 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.

## **20 Communal apartment**

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

## **21 Party Schools**

They were established after the Revolution of 1917, in different levels, with the purpose of training communist cadres and activists. Subjects such as 'scientific socialism' (Marxist-Leninist Philosophy) and 'political economics' besides various other political disciplines were taught there.

## **22 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The anti-Semitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to



the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

### **23 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.

### **24 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 6thOctober 1973 and ended on 22ndOctober on the Syrian front and on 26thOctober on the Egyptian front.

### **25 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20thParty Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

### **26 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 Dairymanbecame an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

### **27 Gordin, Yakov (1853-1909)**

Ukrainian-born Yiddish author. He emigrated to the USA in 1891 and is the author of nearly 100 plays, among the most popular of which were The Jewish King Lear, Lithuanian Lurier Brothers, God Man and the Devil, Over the Ocean, etc. Yakov Gordin translated a number of European classical plays into Yiddish and had a great influence on New York's Yiddish theater in its formation period.