

# Elina Falkenshtein

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Interviewer:

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## My family background

My granddad, Ilija Aron Moyshevich Falkov, was born in Ludza in 1867. [Ludza: a town that belonged to the province of Vitebsk until 1917, now it belongs to Latvia]. He completed two grades of a provincial elementary school. He knew ancient Hebrew, Ivrit, the Talmud, Jewish history and Russian literature well, or so my father told me. I was named Elina after my grandfather. My grandfather dealt with timber processing, first for private owners, and then for the management of the Moscow-Vindava [today Ventspils] railroad. It appears that he then peddled metalwork, traveling from village to village, selling his hardware to peasants. My grandfather died of a heart attack while sitting at the table in Ludza in 1924.

His wife, Goda Peisahovna Falkova, nee Gordina, was born in 1870, but I don't know where. She was a housewife, she sew and knitted. I don't know anything about her siblings. My father's parents got married in 1895 in Ludza; they lived on 31, Ostrovsk Street. Grandmother Goda Peisahovna lived with us in Riga, but I don't remember her. She simply wasn't allowed to be with me. She died of tuberculosis in Riga in 1939 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery.

My father, Mikhail Ilyich Falkov, was born in Ludza on 23rd December 1899. It is difficult to say how strictly Orthodox his family was. Ludza was a Jewish settlement; there all was colored with Jewish religion and Jewish culture. Papa left his parents' house at the age of 14 for Pskov [today Russia], where he studied at an institute. He returned home in 1918 before moving to Riga. In all probability, he entered the Faculty of Mechanics of the Latvian University in 1919. My father studied at university for about ten years. He studied, as a matter of fact, with my mother; they were from the same city. As soon as they finished university, they got married. They were unusual students in that they signed up for individual courses. That's why their education took so long. Papa, while he studied at university, taught Hebrew, the history of the Jewish people, mathematics, electro-technology and physics at a Jewish gymnasium in Riga. Until 1940, my father worked as an engineer in the factories of a paper and veneer company. He held a high-ranking post. As far as my

father's biography is concerned, I would like to add that Papa served in the Latvian army. When his tour of duty was finished, he resigned his post, probably sometime in the 1920s.

### **Growing up**

My parents got married in 1929. When I was born, they already lived in Riga, on 14, Shkolnoi Street. We were lucky enough to return to this very same apartment after our evacuation to Sverdlovsk region. After our return my father found, in different apartments, the remains of the wonderful furniture made from Karelian birch and redwood that had been in our apartment before the war. The story of how we left during the evacuation I only know from the memories of my mother and grandmother. That summer we were at the dacha [cottage] in Yurmala with my grandmother. Papa stormed in and cried, 'Anna Abramovna! War!'

My grandmother sewed backpacks for me and my brother and around our necks we wore little bags for our documents. I remember that I had a striped housecoat that survived the war and came back to Riga with us. And, when echelons overtook us during the bombing, my grandmother would cover me and my brother with that housecoat. 'To save us', I thought at the time. But then, when I was already a grown-up, I understood that she covered us up so that we couldn't see anything.

### **During the war**

Papa, when the war started, probably expected someone to come for him. But in our courtyard in Riga lived a captain or a major, a pilot who had a son that was friends with my brother. This pilot ran up to us and shouted, 'Get in here!' He threw us in a truck and took us to some unknown place. After, I remember, we were walking and Papa held me under his arm. We went on foot towards Sebezha [a city on the border of Latvia and Russia], while many people passed us heading in the opposite direction, saying that behind them were Germans and we should go to Riga. Grandmother said, 'We will only move forward!' From those who returned to Riga, nothing has ever been heard of again.

As to my father's views on Orthodoxy: he was a secular man, but he knew and understood everything. When we returned from evacuation, from Tovda in Sverdlovsk region, my father set me on his knee and told me all about Jewish holidays, traditions and history. These were something like my father's fairytales for me.

### **After the war**

The most interesting thing was that Papa taught me how to read and write in Yiddish. I might not know certain words, but I can basically write in Yiddish. And when, not long ago, it was time to learn Hebrew, everyone was amazed at how easily it came to me; I didn't even mix up the letters. In 1948 Papa brought home the big children's book, Kvitko [1](#), in which, for each word, there was a poem in Yiddish. Of course I speak less and less now, but I understand songs. I simply have no time to study and keep up the language. In fact, even today, in the Jewish school where I work, there isn't a teacher of Yiddish. But when, in the 1980s, everything changed, when everything became possible, then it seemed that I was ready for it because inside I knew a lot already. My Papa simply told me about everything without a religious overtone.

After the war, when we lived in Riga, my family didn't observe Jewish religious traditions. Did the Soviet government influence us? No. It was simply that my parents were very intelligent, educated

people who were also democratically inclined. They were well versed in Jewish culture and writers. Our house was often filled with interesting people; there were meetings that took place even before the war.

When, at the beginning of the 1950s, the attacks against cosmopolitans [see campaign against 'cosmopolitans'] [2](#) and the Doctors' Plot [3](#) began, my father was forced to leave his work; he was probably asked to leave. By this time Papa had become the head of a large corporation. He was dismissed from the Communist Party. During these days, in one of the rooms of our big, seven-bedroom apartment from before the war, there was a stove, which we 'fed' all 30 volumes of a pre-war edition of Dubnow's [4](#) body of work. I can still see Mama, or Papa, I don't remember who, throwing volumes into the stove. The cover of that edition was white and someone had cut out the title and author so that, if the NKVD [5](#) should happen to come by, they wouldn't know the author. We had many, many books in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew.

When the Doctors' Plot had calmed down, Papa worked at the ministry and then, in 1955, he began to work at a timber processing plant in Elgava. He went to work there in order to receive a pension. He was the head engineer. He retired about six months before the official retirement age because he had heart problems. This was about 1959, when I finished university. In general, the Falkovs are known to have weak hearts.

One of my father's sister was called Raisa, Rasel or Raisa Ilyichna as was the proper way of saying it in Russia. She was born in 1895. She graduated from the Institute for Foreign Languages in Moscow, and she taught English in technical schools in Moscow. She spent all her life in Russia, and she died there, too.

My father's second sister, Mina, was born in 1897. She was a very impressive personality. During one of her marriages she even managed to live in the Kremlin. Aunt Mina's son, Mihail Falkov, lives in Riga.

My father's third sister, Ljuba, was born in 1898. After the war she ended up in Ukraine and worked in a textile workshop in Kiev for a very long time. She didn't have a family.

My father's youngest sister, Polina, born in 1906, was the most active, most combative woman. She lived in Moscow. But then the end of the 1930s came, when everybody who was from Latvia began to be looked at as a spy. She was accused of spying for Japan and was sent to a camp in Kolyma [region in the Northern part of Russia where the infamous Gulag [6](#) camps were located]. After the camp she ended up in Udmurtia, next to Izhevsk, where my father's youngest brother, Uncle Yasha, served his sentence. While in the camp, Uncle Yasha was saved by a simple woman, whom he later married and had children with. That's where our Udmurtian line of relatives comes from.

My maternal grandfather was Isidor or Israel Borovik. He died around 1924. He was from Vilnius [capital of Lithuania]. He was sent to be a teacher in Ludza. I don't know whether there was a Jewish or a Russian school there. He was even a rabbi in Ludza for a while. As he was a teacher, he had beautiful handwriting; he drew the letters one by one. There are many stories about my grandfather. He wasn't from this world, even as a teacher. The children could behave as badly as they wanted in class. He is said to have been reading newspapers or books until the candle or the paraffin lamp went out by itself. My mother probably resembled him in that respect. She simply

worshiped him. Perhaps because she also lived in some kind of fantasy world.

My maternal grandmother, Hannah Abramova Borovika, was born in Lithuania in 1873 and died in Riga in 1958. She was probably the main carrier of tradition in our family. She was a very interesting woman. She was really raised in the Jewish tradition. She was permeated with it through and through. I remember her explaining that eating pork was forbidden because it is written in the Torah, and because pigs eat their piglets. My grandmother was a unique personality. It is maybe thanks to her that we survived the war. We wrote down my grandmother's life. What I wrote down back then helped me a lot later in my life. She told us about the family in which she grew up, about her life in a small village.

When my grandmother was ill, my mother used to go to the cemetery to collect medicinal herbs. And when she recovered, she was given a new name. She had about seven names altogether; the ones I remember were Hannah, Anna and Maria. My grandmother was a tailor. She had her own tailor school. Not in the traditional sense, but a school where she was teaching. My grandmother invented her own curved ruler. She was able to teach anyone any kind of tailoring in two or three lessons.

I was lucky that she lived for so long. I learned much from her. The most important thing is sobriety. Sobriety with respect to origin. At the time she said to me, 'All right! You may marry a Russian. But don't forget, it may happen that one day, when you need help most, you will be reproached for being a Jew.' I wrote down the story of her life but unfortunately I don't have that book anymore.

Despite her religious upbringing she was a progressive woman. She kept telling me, 'Why does the whole town have to know when I sleep with my husband and when I don't'. That was in Ludza. And then she stopped going to the mikveh. 'If you go there, it will be clear to everyone why you are going there', she explained. Well, she was such a granny! When my grandfather died she was around 40 and was left alone with a bunch of children.

Later, in Riga, she tried to open a sewing workshop, like Vera Pavlovna [heroine of the novel *What Is To Be Done* by Chernyshevsky] [7](#), but, of course, the needlewomen stole everything from her. The whole thing ended like that. She sewed during the war too, but being paid in cash was out of the question; she was given food for her work.

On Pesach 1955, while my grandmother got special dishes and spoons, I went to our acquaintances to buy a kosher chicken and I cooked meat soup with dumplings on the stove in her room. Once, at Jewish New Year, when my grandmother was still able to walk, we went to the synagogue together. I know the synagogue because I remember it from that time. At the time the balcony was still screened, there were some small holes, and women weren't allowed to go downstairs. The synagogue is different now.

My mother, Dina Isidorovna Falkova, nee Borovika, was born in Ludza on 23rd May 1899. She was called Dulce in her childhood. She, just like my father, left her home when she was young. After finishing elementary school in Ludza, she gained admission to a high school in Daugavpils [until 1917 it belonged to the Province of Vitebsk, now it belongs to Latvia]. My mother was admitted, and although she was sent some money, she earned a living by teaching and by darning socks very artistically: she got one kopeck for each hole she mended.

My mother graduated from a teacher training course in Orsha [until 1917 it belonged to the Province of Vitebsk, now it belongs to Belarus]. She was small with long braids. My mother's classmates told me about her first teaching practice - the school-inspector looked into the class-room and went to the principal in indignation. 'Why do you leave a class without a teacher?!', he said. In that class, my mother was the teacher. My mother was more of a teacher than a mathematician. She transmitted a love of her subject to the children. She nurtured the human side of the children. After the war my mother worked in regular and evening schools and gave lectures at the Teacher Training Institute. She was elected - with no scientific degrees - an associate member of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the Soviet Union.

My grandmother, Hannah Abramova, had three children according to the documents - Yasha, Moisey and my mother. I knew Moisey Borovik. He was a furrier. His wife was from a wealthy Jewish family. When the war began, they were transported to a transit camp and he never saw his wife again. He went through many camps. He didn't like to talk about his experiences. When the first film about Auschwitz was shown, he didn't want to see it, but eventually he went to see it. He came back and said, 'What they showed there was paradise. But to us, it was horrible.' Uncle Moisey was an educated man, or more precisely, a self-educated man. My mother's other brother, Yasha, went to try his luck in Brazil.

I have one brother, Israel Mikhailovich Falkov. He was born on 1st January 1935 in Riga. He graduated from the Moscow oil institute and drilled holes for water and oil in Latvia. Now he is retired and lives in the USA.

I was born in Riga in November 1938. We had a loving and happy family. In the summers we would rent a dacha in Yurmala as was proper in the years before the war. I devoted my entire life to pedagogy, and worked in many schools in Riga as well as at the Institute for Teacher Training. For the last ten years, however, I've been working in Riga's Jewish school. I was this school's vice-principal, in charge of academics, and the deputy director. Now I teach mathematics. To be honest, I've always been more interested in the work of a pedagogue than mathematics.

I finished school in 1954, right after the dethroning of Stalin's cult of personality [see Twentieth Party Congress] [8](#), when we were all in a very strange state of mind. I finished secondary school at the age of 16, and I had enough time for serious thought. I already knew that I would go work in a school; there were no other thoughts in my mind. I began to add everything up: first, there was no place in Riga to obtain a qualification in elementary school education. Secondly, I was always adept at learning history and literature, but I decided it wasn't possible for me to associate myself with history or literature. Because, what was I to tell children in three or four years? Chemistry and physics, I felt, should only be taught by men. All that was left to me was mathematics because, no matter what happens,  $2 \text{ times } 2 \text{ is } 4$ .

To be honest, I did well in all subjects. I was the best student in our school. I chose mathematics, not literature, for which I had a gift. The same gift, in fact, that my mother had. I graduated from the Latvian University in physics and mathematics. My mother tongue is Russian but I also speak Latvian and English. I have a PhD in pedagogical sciences.

My husband, Yevgenii Mikhailovich Falkenshtein, was born in 1931. He is from Rezekne, [until 1917, it was part of Pskov region, today it's in Latvia]. He is Jewish, a radio engineer and former officer in the Soviet army, although now retired.

I have two children. My daughter Marina was born in 1957. She graduated from the Latvian University, the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics, with a degree in programming. She now works as an elementary school teacher in the Jewish school in Riga. My son Leonid was born in 1959. He also graduated from the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics of the Latvian University. Now he has his own business: a sales firm.

My grandmother Hannah was Marina's nanny. It was very frightening. She would take Marina in her arms and could see nothing. Marina was named after either my grandmother's aunt or sister. The name was either Marianna or Marian. That's why she became Marina. We named our son Leonid because one can hear the sound Anya in his name. [Editor's note: The interviewee probably refers to the commonly used name for Leonid, Lionia, which sounds a bit like the common nickname for Anna, Anya.] My children live in Riga. I also have four grandchildren: Karina, who is 14, and Polina, who is 13, are Marina's children. Dina, who is 20 and a student at the International School of Economics, and Roman, who is 17 and a student at the Latvian Musical Academy, are Leonid's children.

My children know very well that they are Jewish and don't turn away from their Jewish roots. Marina, of course, is much more interested in her background. My son is more neutral. Marina's children study at a Jewish school and my son's children, although they finished a Russian school, still consider themselves Jews.

My father died in Riga in December 1964 and was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Shmerli. My mother died in Riga on 25th March 1969.

I have lived an interesting and satisfying life with my husband. We traveled much around Russia, but we always remembered that our roots lay in Latvia. As a matter of fact, when our children were teenagers, we often took them to Lutzin and Rezekne so that they would know where their ancestors came from. My husband and I try to keep Jewish traditions in our household, remembering and celebrating every Jewish holiday.

## Glossary

### **1 Kvitko, Lev (1890-1952)**

Jewish writer, arrested and shot dead together with several other Yiddish writers, rehabilitated posthumously.

### **2 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'.

### **3 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the Party, the Pravda, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

### **4 Dubnow, Simon (1860-1941)**

One of the great modern Jewish historians and thinkers. Born in Belarus, he was close to the circle of the Jewish enlightenment in Russia. His greatest achievement was his study of the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe and their spiritual and religious movements. His major work was the ten volume World History of the Jewish People. Dubnow settled in Berlin in 1922. When Hitler came to power he moved to Riga, where he was put into the ghetto in 1941 and shot by a Gestapo officer on 8 December the same year.

### **5 NKVD**

People's Committee of Internal Affairs; it took over from the GPU, the state security agency, in 1934.

### **6 Gulag**

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

### **7 Chernyshevsky, Nikolay Gavrilovich (1828-1889)**

Russian critic and editor, who began his journalistic career in 1853 at *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), which he turned into the leading radical publication of the time. He emphasized the social aspect of literature. His novel *Chto delat* (What Is To Be Done?, 1863) was regarded as a revolutionary classic in the Soviet Union. Chernyshevsky was arrested for revolutionary activities in 1862, sentenced to seven years of hard labor and twenty years of exile in Siberia. He was allowed

to leave Siberia due to bad health condition in 1883 and spent the rest of his days in his native Saratov.

### **8 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.