

# Sima Medved

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

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*Sima Medved is a very nice small lady with vivid eyes, a kind smile and a great sense of humor. She is very sociable and always ready to help other people. Her neighbors and friends like her a lot, respect her and listen to what she says. She speaks logically and can assess situations from the past and today alike. She lives with her daughter and son-in-law in a nice apartment. She has a cozy room of her own, but she is too active to stay alone in her room. She affectionately criticizes her daughter for a dinner that is 'different from what we cooked in the colony'. She loves it when her grandchildren come to visit. Sima likes playing chess and cards with Leo, her youngest grandson. She often loses a game and feels happy about it.*

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## **My family background**

My family lived in the Jewish farming colony in Novozlatopol, Ekaterinoslav province). . There was very rich black soil in the area. There was sufficient land because land was provided per person, and Jewish families were big. Ekaterinoslav province was located within the Pale of Settlement 1 in tsarist Russia. Jewish farming colonies were founded in the 1840s to develop new territories. Jewish families from smaller towns and villages of Belarus and Ukraine moved to richer lands hoping for a better life. There were about 120 families in our colony. Each family consisted of 25-40 people of various generations. When the children grew up they built annexes to their parents' homes and lived together supporting each other.

The family of my father, Abe-Shmul Medved, comes from a Jewish colony. My grandparents left their ancestors in a small poor town somewhere in Vinnitsa region to head for new land when my father was a small boy. His parents died in this colony in the 1870s. We didn't discuss the past in our family - we had too many things to do to provide for the family. When I was born when my father was an aging man and the head of a big family. He was born in 1863. His family and his neighbors were farmers.

My father's two brothers also lived in the colony. They were farmers. One of them, Avrum, born in 1865, lived near us. He had six children: Isaac, Hana, Esther, Mehame, Israel and Hava. In 1920,

during the Civil War [2](#), Uncle Avrum and his family moved to Bakhmach because they feared gangs [\[3\]](#) and pogroms. They never returned to the colony. My father's second brother, Mishe-Yankel, born in 1867, lived in Novozlatopol. He built many houses in the colony. He had many children: Tible, Isaac, Dverl, Khasia, Osher and Masha. He died in 1930. His children also died, and their children moved to other parts of the world.

My father was a very religious man. He observed all Jewish traditions and followed all laws. He went to the synagogue to pray every day, and on holidays he even sang at the synagogue. He also prayed at home with his tallit and tefillin. I even remember some words from what he sang on Saturday evenings at home, but I have no idea what they mean. I don't know where my father studied if he studied at all. There were religious books in Yiddish at home, which he used for praying, but there were no fiction books.

My father was used to hard work in the village. He got married at 17. His first wife came from the family of colonists. I don't know her name. They had six children. In 1898 my father's first wife died.

My oldest stepsister, Hana, was born in 1879. She married our neighbor Shmul and they had five children. During World War I her husband, a soldier in the Russian army, perished at the front. Hana moved to Alexandrovsk. She had to leave three of her children in a children's home. She worked as a laborer and was very poor. She died in Alexandrovsk in 1960.

My oldest stepbrother, Ziske, was born in 1886. He finished elementary school in Novozlatopol and worked as a shop assistant at a haberdashery in Gulyai Pole. For those that lived in Gulyai Pole it seemed a big town in the steppe. My brother married a beautiful girl called Olga, and they had two children: a boy and a girl. In 1914 when World War I began my brother was recruited to the Russian army. Ziske perished at the front. His wife notified us about his death. Olga moved to Rozovka where her parents lived. In 1919 a villager stabbed her son in the back with a fork during a row. He died. His mother was trying to help him, but the boy screamed, 'Mother, leave me alone. You can't help me'. Olga and her daughter moved to America in the early 1920s, and we lost track of her.

My second stepbrother, Avrul, was born in 1887. He was a cheese-maker. When I was a child he lived in Alexandrovsk. Later he moved to another town. He seldom came to see us, and I have dim memories about him. I know that he died in evacuation in 1942.

My second stepsister, Sonia was born in 1888 and she was the sorrow and curse of our family. There are people who can't love anybody and are not liked by others either. She was so evil: she hurt her brothers and sisters and never did any good. There was no man willing to share his life with her. She remained a spinster. She was a terrible person. She envied everybody, was a trouble-maker and a problem for everybody. During the Great Patriotic War [4](#) she was in evacuation and lived the rest of her life in Novozlatopol. She worked at the collective farm from 1928. Nobody liked her. When she was dying she said, 'I shall die and rot'. She died in 1970 leaving no good memories behind.

My third stepsister, Slava, was born in 1891 and she was very kind. She married Iosif, a very nice man. They lived nearby. Her daughter, Fania, was born in 1914. During World War I Slava's husband was hiding from recruitment. He even fractured his foot to stay away from the army. He was hiding in the shed under straw and hay. When a military officer was approaching my mother

warned Slava's husband saying, 'Tsi geyt der bik' ['A bull is coming' in Yiddish]. Slava and Iosif had another boy and a girl later. They worked in the colony and later on a collective farm. During the Great Patriotic War their family helped to evacuate cattle from the collective farm [5](#) to Northern Caucasus [1,500 km from Ukraine]. After the war Slava and her family returned to Novozlatopol, but there was a famine and poverty awaiting them there, so they moved on to Zaporozhye. Slava died in 1976. Fania and her daughter also passed away, and Fania's grandchildren moved to other towns and countries.

Mayer, the youngest of my father's six children from his first marriage, was born in 1895. I remember little about him. He didn't study. In Zaporozhye he collected and sold salvage material. In 1941 he failed to evacuate from Zaporozhye and perished during the occupation. He was single.

After his first wife died my father wanted to have another wife at home. Shadkhanim recommended somebody in Ekaterinoslav. It was my mother to be. We sewed wheat and barley, had horses and cows. We had a big kitchen garden to grow what we needed for life and cellars full of barrels with pickled cucumbers, tomatoes, watermelons and sauerkraut. We kept chickens, ducks and turkeys. It was all a lot of work. We never hired employees. There was Jewish population mainly in Jewish colonies. According to the census of 1901 the population of Novo-Zlatopol was 817 and 669 of them were Jews. The rest, I believe, were Ukrainians living in the neighboring farmsteads. There was one bigger room and a smaller Deutsch Strasse (German Street), because there was one German family living there. I remember this family well. They were good people. They often came to see us. Their yard was very clean and there were flowers in their garden. We got along well with Ukrainians living in the neighboring villages. Neighbors often came to see us and we helped each other. We spoke Russian with non-Jews. They were all farmers and so were my ancestors, there was plenty of land around and there was nothing to argue about. We never heard anybody saying unpleasant things about Jews. On holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Purim, Chanukah and Yom Kippur) people went to the streets signing, dancing and greeting each other. All inhabitants of the colony got together to chat, joke and enjoy themselves. They all spoke Yiddish to one another. Later they all went to the synagogue, a two-storied building. Men prayed down. My father's two brothers also lived in the colony. They were farmers. One of them Avrum, born in 1865 lived near us. He had 6 children: Isaac, Hana, Esther, Mehame, Israel and Hava. In 1920 during the Civil war uncle Avrum and his family moved to Bakhmach fearing bands and pogroms (2). They never returned to the colony and I have no more information about the family. My father's second brother Mishe-Yankel (born in 1867) lived in Novo-Zlatopol. My uncle built many houses in the colony. He had many children: Tible, Isaac, Dverl, Khasia, Osher and Masha. My uncle died in 1930. His children also died and their successors moved to other parts of the world. My father was a very religious man. He observed all Jewish traditions and followed all rules. He went to synagogue to pray every day, and on holidays he even sang at the synagogue. He also prayed at home with his thales, a cube on his head, straps on his hand, and I even remember what he sang on Saturday "Itzymakh, itzymakh ete shmarekh", but I have no idea what it means. I don't know where my father studied if he studied at all. There were religious books in Yiddish at home. My father prayed with them, but there were no fiction books.

My mother, Khasia, was born in Ekaterinoslav in 1875. When I grew up I often wondered what it was like to marry a man with grown-up children. Only despair could push a young woman into such a marriage. My mother's first husband's name was Rivkin. Their daughter, Freida, was born in

1893. I don't know under what extraordinary circumstances my mother divorced her husband and why the rabbi of Ekaterinoslav gave his approval for the divorce. My mother didn't want to discuss this matter. Of course my mother couldn't have high expectations for another marriage. and in 1899 she and her 6-year-old daughter settled down in the colony.

As I said before, my parents met through matchmakers. They had a modest wedding with a chuppah and a rabbi. Only members of the family came to the wedding. After the wedding my mother moved to my father's house. Her share there was hard work in the field and at home, taking care of many children and the numerous duties of a wife and mother. She managed well. She was kind and nice and treated her own and her adopted children with warmth. I don't know whether she was educated or not, but she could read in Yiddish and Russian and knew many prayers. On Fridays she always lit candles. She koshered all her kitchen utensils. Before Pesach everyday kitchen utensils were taken to the attic and replaced with fancy dishes and utensils that were koshered as well. I remember the process of koshering dishes: a big stone was heated in the stove and put in a big bowl into which my mother had put casseroles, spoons, forks and dishes before. We only used kosher dishes and kitchenware. My mother cooked delicious food in a big Russian stove [6](#): chicken, goose or turkey stew and many other things.

My parents had twin girls, Feigele and Esther, in 1900. My brother, Iosif, was born in 1903, I followed in 1906, and my youngest sister, Vera, in 1913. I remember that Freida wasn't with us when I turned five or six. She had left for Ekaterinoslav where she worked at a greengrocery and got married. I saw her once because my father took me with him when he went to that town on business. She seemed an adult woman to me, I addressed her as I would address a stranger and everybody laughed at me. Then there was the Civil War, and my mother died, and we lost track of Freida. In the 1950s Iosif and I tried to find her. We found out that she had perished during the war, but her son was alive. We correspond with him. He lives in Israel now.

According to the census of 1901 the population of Novozlatopol was 817 and 669 of them were Jews. The rest, I believe, were Ukrainians living in the neighboring farmsteads. There was one German family living there. I remember this family well. They were good people. They often came to see us. Their yard was very clean, and there were flowers in their garden. We got along well with Ukrainians living in the neighboring villages. Neighbors often came to see us, and we helped each other. We spoke Russian with the non-Jews. They were all farmers and so were my ancestors, there was plenty of land around and there was nothing to argue about.

## Growing up

I remember our house well. Like all other houses in the colony it was built from self-made bricks. Bricks were made in wooden frames filled with a mixture of sand, clay and water. They were dried in the sun and removed from the frames. There were three rooms in our house. The children slept on planks installed on bricks: my twin sisters, Iosif, Mayer and I slept there. My parents and little Vera slept on a similar bed in the same room. My older sisters slept in the other room. There were a big table, benches, cupboards and a box in the third room. There was no other furniture in the house.

We sowed wheat and barley, and kept horses and cows. We had a big kitchen garden where we could grow what we needed for a living, and cellars full of barrels with pickled cucumbers, tomatoes, watermelons and sauerkraut. We kept chickens, ducks and turkeys. It was all a lot of

work. We never hired employees. We never heard anybody saying unpleasant things about Jews. On holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Purim, Chanukkah and Yom Kippur people went out into the streets singing, dancing and saying hello to each other. All inhabitants of the colony got together to chat, crack jokes and enjoy themselves. They all spoke Yiddish to one another. Later they all went to the synagogue, a two-storied building. Men prayed downstairs, and women were upstairs.

I was my father's favorite, and his brothers and sisters liked me best, too. When my father went to visit them he took me with him to boast about me. They believed I was the smartest and wittiest in the family. My father was very proud of me. When I turned 6 my father took me to school and asked them to admit me earlier because I was so smart. My twin sisters were already at school, but they had problems with studying whereas I already knew the alphabet and numbers, although nobody had taught me specifically. I was admitted to school, even though the standard age to begin school was 8. The only problem was that I was too short to write on the blackboard and had to stand on a stool.

The school was a one-storied brick building. (We studied Russian, arithmetic, geography and the history of Russia at school. Boys and girls studied together. There was a big portrait of Tsar Nicholas on the wall above the blackboard in our classroom, and we sang the Russian anthem, 'God, save the tsar...', every morning. There were no religious classes at school. [Editor's note: The tsarist government was interested in the assimilation of Jewish farmers and tried to distance them from Judaism and Jewish traditions. The government opened Russian elementary schools in colonies.]) I was a success at school. Our schoolteachers weren't Jewish and didn't live in the colony. They arrived at school on a horse-driven cart every morning.

From my childhood I remember how hard my parents worked from early morning until evening. They worked in the field and about the house and we tried to help them from an early age. The older children took care of the younger ones, and we also weeded the fields, watered and planted plants and harvested crops in fall. We all had a rest on Saturdays. I don't remember our parents reading us a book or telling us stories. They got very tired at work. We spoke Yiddish at home, observed the traditions of our people and went to the synagogue. It was a one-storied building constructed with self-made bricks by the first settlers. I don't remember whether there was a mikveh. I guess there must have been one because women strictly observed all traditions. In all families in the colony there was one common language of communication: Yiddish. I could read and write in Yiddish, although I wasn't specifically taught Yiddish. I can still remember poems that we learned by heart at school., but I've forgotten our teachers or their names.

I remember the period of World War I. There was concern in the family that was followed by grief for our brother Zisl and Hana's husband. When Iosif was hiding in the shed in the yard he scared little Vera so that she began to stutter. My mother went to ask the rabbi's advice at the synagogue. I don't know what he told her to do, but she cured Vera.

In 1916 various gangs robbed and killed people. Once a few bandits broke into our house demanding food and wine. My mother slaughtered two chickens and cooked them for the bandits. They sang 'Beat the zhydy [kike], save Russia'. [An anti-Semitic song that was sung in the streets.] They ate and drank and left our house. They didn't do us any harm.

During a typhoid epidemic in 1916-1917 there was no medication nor a hospital. There was only one doctor, and he couldn't manage with all the patients. My mother contracted the disease from

looking after our neighbor and died in 1918.

The residence of Nestor Makhno [7](#) was in Gulyai Pole. He came to Novozlatopol several times, and I saw him. He had long hair, a pock-marked face, was short and repugnant. Once he arrived in a vehicle, and that was the first time I ever saw a car. At other times he came on a cart with a machine gun installed on it and scared people with his anarchistic and anti- Semitic speeches. Anyway, Makhno himself was not nearly as horrific as his gangs beating and killing people during pogroms. They took away valuables, food and livestock. The bandits shot a Jewish family of seven. Three small children were killed in their beds. I have a terrible recollection of seven sleighs with seven dead bodies. What an awful tragedy it was. We were so scared.

They came to our house, too. My father was in bed covered with a thick blanket. He was ill. My sister told them he had typhoid, and they didn't touch him. They took away everything. Colonists had no weapons to protect themselves, so the young people grabbed spades, pitchforks and sticks if bandits came at night. The colony, that had always had plenty of food, suddenly turned into a poor area. People were leaving. We moved to Zaporozhye in 1920, but we were poor there, too. We starved and picked up potato peels in the streets to cook and eat them. My sister Feigele ate some unripe fruit and died in 1920.

We were hoping that the Revolution of 1917 [8](#) would improve people's lives and bring equality to people. We thought that people would get an opportunity to study, that peasants would receive land to work on it and that nobody would hurt us.

Many villagers were trying to escape to town because of the pogroms. We lived with my older sister, Hana, in a basement in Zaporozhiye. Many people came there from small villages. They had no dwelling at all, therefore this basement was good enough for them. Many people had unbearable living conditions. There were two rooms and two families: Hana's family and another family.

I got a job at a factory that manufactured matches. I filled frames with matches that were dipped in sulfur and then packed. It was a private factory owned by a Jew. I was 14 at the time, and first they didn't want to employ me, but an acquaintance of ours pulled strings for me, and I got the job. There were three Jewish girls at the factory. They became my friends. I went to the cinema for the first time in my life. It was a mute film, and I didn't understand a thing. My friends asked me how I liked it. I couldn't understand how a boy could turn into a man in an instant, but I was ashamed to tell the truth, so I lied and said, 'I liked it a lot'. We went to a club for the proletariat youth in a small one-storied wooden building where we sang Jewish songs. I also attended a drama club. We staged plays in Yiddish and I played the parts of old ladies. I don't remember exactly what plays we staged, though.

Within some time the factory was closed, and I lost my job. I received a 10- ruble monthly allowance. The unemployment committee opened up a sewing school where we learned how to sew and make straw hats and walking sticks. I spoke Russian with my friends. I had a few Russian friends, but most of my friends were young Jewish men and women.

In January 1924 I came to a rehearsal. Our tutor told me that Lenin had died and that our rehearsal was cancelled. We had a meeting. Older people made speeches and cried and we, younger people, cried, too. We were told that we were responsible for the future of our country now and believed it.

We were so enthusiastic! We joined the Komsomol [9](#) league in our strive to be the architects of communism, the bright future of mankind.

Our family had the status of refugees who had suffered under the bandits. In 1924 the US government and the Joint [10](#) provided assistance to such families. My family returned to the Novozlatopol colony and began to restore our life there. The Soviet authorities closed the synagogue. This was the period of the struggle against religion [11](#), but my father continued praying at home. They got together in a minyan at somebody's home. My father used to say, 'So the Soviet power isn't bad, but how come they closed the synagogue then? They turned it into a storehouse. What the hell?!'.

My sister, Sonia, bred pigs. We didn't eat pork, but we sold it at the market. My brother, Iosif, went to study in Odessa. He finished a Rabfak [12](#) (trade school) and wanted to continue his education. Later he entered and graduated from a technical institute in Moscow. He became a good engineer. He was the only member of our family with a higher education.

A Jewish school was opened in the colony at that time. It was a new school, specifically built for Jewish children by the Soviet authorities. The curriculum was similar to what children studied in other schools, only that we studied in Yiddish. My younger sister, Vera, studied at this school, too.

I wanted to stay in Zaporozhiye and went to work at the foundry of the Kommunar Plant in 1924. To cast an item with an opening there had to be a kernel installed in a mould. Kernels were made from sand, clay, flour and additives that were compacted in tins and dried in the stove. I was a laborer making kernels. It was hot and noisy in the foundry, and every now and then a mould with cast iron fell on our feet, but I earned well and liked the work. There were many older Jewish workers at the foundry and only a few young Jewish men. Jews were highly skilled workers. I don't think they were religious. Iron casting was a continuous process and we had to work on Saturdays. But at least all Jews celebrated Jewish holidays at that time. Young people didn't go to the synagogue because holidays were workdays, but all families remembered old traditions and tried to celebrate nonetheless. Older people prayed, and younger people respected their religiosity and tried to join their parents for a celebration.

I had an opportunity to rent an apartment and pay for it. I didn't cook for myself. I had meals at the canteen in the plant. It was a good canteen. Of course, following the kashrut was out of the question considering the circumstances. I was a Komsomol activist. I spoke and recited poems about Lenin and other leaders of the Revolution at meetings. I became a candidate for the Communist Party at the foundry in 1927, and a party member in 1928. I believed that communists were the vanguard of the people and wanted to be one of them. I also attended evening school classes. For my industriousness and willingness I was sent to a Rabfak in Kiev in 1928.

I had friends and we often got together. We played 'flower flirtation': boys and girls wrote greetings or declarations of love and exchanged them. I didn't spend much time playing with my friends because I was trying to study. It was popular to correspond with military men at the time. It was a common thing. Girls were stimulated to support and strengthen the patriotic spirits of the brave young men guarding the peace and quiet of our motherland. I corresponded with a Russian military. He wrote interesting and smart letters. Once he wrote that he was demobilizing and wanted to take me with him. He had a mother, but no father, but all I could think of was studying. I wrote to him about my future plans, and it put an end to our correspondence.

There were big changes in Novozlatopol in 1928. The collective farm Vanguard was organized [during the collectivization] [13](#), and all farmers, including my father, became collective farmers. Leib Iorsh became chairman of the collective farm and Meyer Ushkatz was the chairman of the town council. They were nice men, and I had known them since we were children. There were vineyards in the collective farm. My brother, Avrul, establish a cheese-making production. My sister Vera moved to Zaporozhiye after finishing school where she went to study at the factory school [(evening higher secondary school)]. I spent my vacations and days off at home. .

I went to the factory school in 1929. When I was going to Kiev I believed I was smart and intelligent and thought I knew everything one needed to know. But when I came to school my teacher said to me, 'Medved, in order for you to know that you know you need to study a lot more'. I did my best. After finishing the Rabfak in 1931 (factory school) I entered Kiev Polytechnic Institute without exams. When I was still at the Rabfak I lived in the hostel until a friend of mine, Marusya, took me to live in her apartment. She was a very nice girl. She was arrested in 1937 [during the so-called Great Terror] [14](#). I don't know why she was arrested - nobody explained the reason for her arrest. Besides it wasn't a good idea to address authorities with questions about 'enemies of the people'. At that time many active Komsomol members and communists were arrested, but we believed that it was correct and that there could be no smoke without a fire. People disappeared for good.

When I lived with Marusya I commuted to the institute by tram and often met with a young man there. He was my age, and his name was Michael Kofman. He was a 4th-year student at the Polytechnic University. He was a nice and easy-going Jewish man. We had much in common,. He was a member of the Communist Party. But we only met in the tram a few times. Then I disappeared from his horizon because I had to move to a collective farm where I got my Komsomol assignment. I had no time to let him know about it.

I studied at the institute for a short time. In 1932 the Party made a decision to send 25,000 active communists to collective farms. We were to carry out the orders of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. We strongly believed that these decisions were correct and were committed to their implementation. This movement was named '25-thousandists'. I was sent to Oratovo village in Kiev region as the party leader of the collective farm.

When I was leaving Kiev the bread coupon system was being introduced. There were many refugees from villages dying in the streets. They were starved to death. I took my ration of bread with me. When I came to the collective farm, the chairman of the farm invited me to dinner. They served soup but there was anything but food components in that soup - some sawdust and whatever else. The mixture smelled of machine oil. I only pretended that I was eating, but the others at the table were actually finishing their soup.

There was an unbelievable famine in Ukraine [15](#) in the village. I found carrots in the fields and that was my main food for a long time. At first the collective farmers didn't trust me, but it helped that I had grown up in a farming colony. I also took care of the people. When I received the order to give everything to the state including the last stocks of grain, we hid two kilos of wheat so that nobody could find it. We slaughtered all livestock because there was no food to keep them. Women were crying, 'We shall die, we shall all starve to death', but I tried to cheer them up and said, 'Hey, we shall live to bake pies'.



«In spring we sowed the wheat that we had hidden and we did make pies after we harvested it. We also kept some milk to give it to the weakest and sick villagers. Of course I realized that it might cost me my life if someone reported on me, but what could I do? In other collective farms people were dying in hundreds, but in our village many survived. In 1934 our collective farm gradually began to come back to life. We organized an equipment yard and got the first tractors. I became head of the political department at the equipment maintenance yard. Nobody cared about my nationality, and I forgot about it, too. People cared about what kind of person I was and how I did my work. Nothing else mattered.

Once in 1935 the secretary of the party district committee called me and asked, 'Did you submit a letter of resignation?' I hadn't done so. It happened to be Michael Kofman, my acquaintance from the tram. He had graduated from the institute and became an officer with the railroad troops. He found me and wrote letters to all the authorities requesting them to dismiss me. In the same year I married senior lieutenant Michael Kofman. He came from a working-class Jewish family in Kremenchug. His parents worked at the tobacco factory there. His older brother, a Komsomol member, died in an accident at a construction site in 1920. One of his sisters was a prosecutor and the other one worked at the tobacco factory. I only met them after my husband died. Their children still correspond with me - we are in-laws and a family.

My husband got a room in a communal apartment [16](#) in Kiev. There were three other families in this apartment. They were all nice people. I worked at the Department of Marxism-Leninism in my former institute. I was an instructor and explained the meaning and main idea of Marxism-Leninism. [Editor's note: (All educational institutions in the fSU had departments teaching and researching on Marx, Lenin and their followers.)] I also continued my studies.

My daughter, Asia, was born in 1937. Before she turned 1, I sent her to a nursery school. Later I found a baby sitter. She was an old woman from a dispossessed family. She was a very nice lady but absolutely ignorant.

I spent my vacations with Asia in the colony. In 1939 my father died. He was buried in the local Jewish cemetery. There was no rabbi, so he was buried without any Jewish rituals. My sisters were there: Sonia, the nasty one, and Esther, one of the twins. They worked at the collective farm. Iosif, Slava's husband, worked with the collective farm cattle.

### **During the war**

My husband served in the Railroad Regiment #6 in Kiev. Later the regiment was transferred to Zhmerinka, a small town and railway joint [200 km from Kiev]. I stayed in Kiev to finish my studies. The commissar of the regiment offered me to become head of the women's council, the (political organization for officers' wives). I told him that I wouldn't mind doing so but that I had to continue my studies. He said that Stalin invited officers' wives to a meeting and that it would be good for me to go, especially because I was politically well-educated. But I had other priorities - to study was my main goal - and refused to go to the meeting. Another officer's wife went there. Stalin received them nicely, and she even brought a record player back, which was a gift from Stalin.

Michael got tired of living alone and began to ask me to continue my studies by correspondence and come join him. I agreed. Asia and I moved to Zhmerinka at the beginning of 1941. We settled down in a communal apartment at the military camp. There were many tenants of various

nationalities, and we all got along very well. My husband's mother came from Kremenchug to live with us. We realized that the war was inevitable and that German troops were close to the border, but we couldn't believe in the worst to happen. My husband and I said to one another that we would just pretend nothing bad was going to happen.

In the middle of June I took Asia to Kiev for a surgery on the adenoids. After the surgery I took her home. In the morning of 22nd June 1941 I went out to buy milk. I saw people running around. I returned home and heard Molotov [17](#) speaking on the radio pronouncing, 'We are at war'. My husband had left me a note telling me to leave for the East. He also left me a suitcase and his officer's certificate. [Editor's note: These were certificates (for officers' wives, whose husbands were at the front, to receive money allowances.)]

My younger sister, Vera, lived in Kiev. She worked at a big plant that was about to evacuate. She was told that she probably couldn't take us with her and was desperate when she heard it. She said, 'Sima, you need to evacuate before I do because if you don't I don't know what I would do'. I took Asia to the railway station. I didn't have any luggage. I believed we would be back home soon. Besides, I wasn't sure if we would be able to leave at all. There were crowds of people at the railway station. They broke through the gates and occupied the railroad platforms. I don't know how I managed to get onto the platform. We didn't have a bite of bread. Vera, who came to see us off, brought us two French buns and two bottles of lemonade. She gave them to someone on the platform to hand them to me, but I only got one bun and one bottle of lemonade.

We were bombed on the way, but our train wasn't damaged. I got off several times on our way and asked local people whether I could stay there, but the answer was always, 'No'. There were no jobs in those towns, and besides enterprises had a priority to employ women that had no officer's certificates. This was only fair because these women had no provisions whatsoever. Our trip lasted four months. In December we reached Novosibirsk in Siberia [3,000 km from Kiev]. I got a job at the mechanics shop of the ammunition factory. There were 300-400,000 employees who manufactured shells. I was responsible for the completion of schedules.

Once I spoke at the party meeting with an appeal to all employees to improve our performance to help the men on the front. Our party leader liked my speech and offered me the position of the leader of the women's committee. I got a room in a good house with heating and a bathroom - for wartime standards these were the best conditions one could hope for. I had to work long hours. Asia went to the 24-hour kindergarten. I seldom saw her, only when I dropped by her kindergarten or on days off.. Michael got in encirclement, escaped, walked 200 km, got to Poltava, saw his mother, helped her to evacuate and returned to the front.

One day in February 1942 I came home and sat down for dinner when all of a sudden the thought that Michael might have perished struck me. Shortly afterwards I got the notification of my husband's death. Later I got to know that he had taken part in the defense of Kiev. Stalin had issued an order 'to stand up for Kiev'. So many people died in this struggle! Michael got in encirclement, escaped, walked 200 km, got to Poltava, saw his mother, helped her to evacuate and returned to the front.

My brother, Iosif, was in evacuation in Siberia, but when the Voluntary Siberian Division was formed he volunteered to join and went to the front. He lost his left arm in the war but returned with many awards.

When I was in Novosibirsk I received a letter from my relatives in Novozlatopol. Young people from the colony went to the front and collective farmers, who had no opportunity to evacuate on their own, went to Northern Caucasus with the collective farm cattle. Seven members of our family reached Mozdok. A number of people stopped on the way to the Caucasus to take a rest. They were captured by the Germans and shot. Life in the Caucasus was very hard. There was a constant threat of German attacks. I wired my family to come join me. They arrived in Novosibirsk: my sister Slava, her husband Iosif, Slava's daughter, Fania, and her baby, another daughter and a son, and my sisters Sonia and Esther. Their trip lasted three months, and they were dirty and had lice. The baby was skin and bones. It was like a dream for them to take a bath. Slava washed everyone in the bathtub and kissed me in her gratitude. They stayed in my room, and I got another room on the second floor of the same house. I also had a plot of land which served as a kitchen garden. Slava, Sonia, Esther and Iosif worked in this kitchen garden. They grew cabbage, potatoes and all other necessary vegetables.

When Kiev was liberated in November 1943 we couldn't wait to go back home. The party leader of the factory tried to convince me to stay at the factory by promising to provide me with all I needed. I was a success at what I was doing. I was good at inspiring people to perform at their best.

In February 1944 my daughter and I returned to Kiev. My relatives went back to Novozlatopol. They worked at the collective farm: Sonia looked after piglets, Esther was a milkmaid and Iosif, Slava's husband, was a vet. Later some younger members of our family moved to Zaporozhiye and either got a job or studied there. Returning to Kiev was a disappointment for me. Although I came back with an assignment of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and had brilliant references from my previous job, I couldn't find a job or place to live. I felt unwelcome. At first I didn't have a clue of what it was about, but then it occurred to me that the reason was that I was a Jew. I managed to get a 16-square-meter room. I went to the regional party committee where I met my former schoolmate. He helped me to get a position at the central committee of the Oil Industry Trade Union for the southern and central parts of Ukraine.

### After the war

Asia began school when she turned 7. She was an intelligent girl and successful at school. My sister Vera returned from evacuation and settled down with me for a year. Then the owner of the room came back from Germany. He brought a truck full of goods with him. I was at work, and he threw my belongings into a shed in the corner of the yard. I was horrified. He returned with his wife, they had no children and they dared to throw me, a widow with a child, out onto the street!

I went to my boss at the Oil Industry Trade Union and told him my story. He was a real bastard. He just said, 'There's nothing I can do for you'. I had a friend, Fenia Demirskaya, and Asia and I went to live with her temporarily. The chairman of the central committee sent me on a business trip to Western Ukraine. I was mad at him. He had no right to send me to a problem area when I had a small daughter whose father had perished at the front. However, I couldn't disobey my management orders, so I had to go.

Western Ukraine joined the USSR in 1940. [Editor's note: It was in fact annexed by the USSR after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.] [18](#) The situation was difficult. There were bandits in the woods who hunted for Soviet leaders. (Editor's note:[Editor's note: They were fighting against the communist rule.]) Women weren't supposed to be sent to such unstable areas, but I was an industrious

employee and went there. I left Asia with my friend. My assignment was to restore trade unions in the oil industry. I moved from one place to another. I had a vehicle at my disposal. Once we were driving uphill, and the driver stopped the truck to cool down the engine. I asked him about bandits and he said, 'You'll be okay. They only kill zhydy [kike] and communists'. Well, I had a passport with me which had my Jewish nationality in it, and I also had my party membership card with me! We arrived in a town, and I was told that bandits had just left. They had cut off one girl's plait - she was a Komsomol member - and told her that next time they would cut off her head if she stayed with the Komsomol.

I conducted a meeting and asked the chairman of the Oil Industry Trade Union to provide me with accommodation further away from the field. He told me that I could stay in his house. At night I heard five shots. Bandits broke into the house of an oil terminal employee, who was a crook. He escaped, but the bandits shot his mother, father and son. It happened about one kilometer from the place where I stayed overnight. That same night the manager of the local oil industry branch was shot, too. It saved me that I had arrived on a truck. They thought I wasn't that important. I conducted several meetings with inhabitants of smaller towns and villages to explain the party policies to them. I also spoke for the Soviet power. Then I returned to Kiev.

Again I went to my boss to ask for his help, and again I heard, 'There's nothing I can do for you'. I didn't go to higher authorities, although I had every right to complain. I submitted a letter of resignation. Even now I think that I was an idiot to do so.

I got a job as an instructor at the district executive committee. I stayed with my friend and tried to find a vacant apartment. After a year I found one. It was a room in a communal apartment with seven or eight neighbors, but it was a 14-15 square meter room, and I was very happy to get it. Vera lived with me until she got married. Her marriage failed, she got divorced and received an apartment from the plant where she was working.

There was growing anti-Semitism in Kiev. Jews couldn't get an employment; there were meetings to condemn the 'cosmopolitans' [this was the so-called campaign against 'cosmopolitans'] [19](#) that lasted till 3-4 o'clock in the morning, then there was this doctors' story [the so-called Doctors' Plot] [20](#), then my Jewish neighbor got arrested - it was scaring. We suffered, but what could we do. I couldn't speak against the general policy because I had a daughter waiting for me at home. Now I come think how could I have possibly managed to bear it all - it was so depressing!

I remember March 1953 when Stalin died. My 15-year-old daughter wrote a patriotic poem about Stalin, but deep in my heart I was glad that he had died. I hoped that things would change for the better. I couldn't forgive him for the war and my husband's death. All people understood that the war was inevitable, so, how could he let the country be unprepared and cause so many deaths.

I got a job at the State Association of Garment Makers where I worked in a guild. We painted shawls, and I was responsible for party activities. My former salary was 3,200 while there I only received 625 rubles.

I became the director of the shop and then I changed to clothes manufacturing. Later I went to make pleated skirts that were in fashion. It was hard work - irons weighed 3-4 kg - but I earned well and worked there until I retired in 1966. I continued to be a member of the Communist Party and was proud of it. I conducted various activities: I spoke at various meetings at schools and higher

educational institutions explaining the meaning of the party policy to the students and convincing them to join the rows of communists. I did understand though that there were different people among communists. That chairman of the Oil Industry Trade Unions, for instance, was a communist, but he caused others and me so many problems. There were many others like him.

As for my private life, I didn't meet a man to spend my life with. Asia and I spent our vacations in Novozlatopol. Later Asia went there alone to help my sisters. Esther and Sonia were getting old, and Asia helped them with their kitchen garden and did repairs in the house. After the war the collective farm stopped to be a Jewish collective farm - there were people of many nationalities there. People treated Esther nicely, but they didn't like Sonia. Esther died in 1972. There are only two Jewish families left in Novozlatopol now. They are elderly people. Slava died in Zaporozhiye in 1976, and her children moved to other places.

My younger sister, Vera, remarried. Her second husband was a nice Jewish man, but he died after 5 or 6 years of their life together. Vera met another man, but their relationship also failed. She died in 1980. She didn't have any children. My favorite brother, Iosif, lived in Moscow after the war. He was an engineer. He was a nice person, and I just adored him. I saw him at his 80th birthday in 1983. His wife was ill, and I cooked all traditional food that we were used to in the colony: gefilte fish - I bought 4 kg of fish and the guests ate it all - sweet and sour stew, chicken and honey cake. Iosif invited the commander of his division and other guests. They enjoyed the food. My brother said, 'Sima, I don't know what it would be like if you weren't here'. Iosif passed away in 1988.

Asia was a success at school. I always tried to inspire her to continue her studies. Once her non-Jewish friend said to her, 'You dream of going to an institute? Do you realize that your last name is Kofman? So, why are you even trying?' I said to Asia, 'Well, this means that you've lost a friend'. I advised her to have Jewish friends who were studying and had goals in life. Asia finished school with honors in 1955. She failed to enter an institute at her first try because she was Jewish. She came home crying. I asked her what had happened. She replied that the teachers at the entrance exams had abused her. I couldn't bear it and wrote a complaint to the Ministry of Education. I wrote that the daughter of a deceased officer, who had finished school with highest grades, failed to enter the Construction Institute.

While the official investigation was on I helped her to get a job at a design institute. I went to the Ministry of Education, and they told me that they would help and asked me to come back in three days. I returned there, but my letter was still there and no signs of their promise to help. I said to them, 'I did hope that you would help'. They replied, 'We will'. I had to go back there several times before I got a paper reading, 'Since Miss Kofman is the daughter of a deceased officer, she is to be admitted to the institute'. The director promised that my daughter would be enrolled in additional lists. When additional lists were issued her name wasn't on them. The director told me that she would be admitted next year. I said, 'How do I know whether you'll be here next year? My daughter will be a student of this institute this year'. I went to the Ministry of Education again. After three days I was told that she was to attend classes. You see, it took more effort for Jewish children to get their education.

Asia met Alik Azarkh, a nice Jewish boy. He was shy and taciturn. His father also perished at the front. Asia helped him with mathematics. He was her fellow student. Asia had classes in the evening and worked at the design institute. Alik and she got married. They had a civil ceremony.

Their daughter, Alla, was born in 1963. Soon afterwards I retired. I like Alik a lot. He knows that he is my son, not just my son-in-law.

I tried to help Asia about the house and looked after Alla. Asia and Alik spent a lot of time working at construction companies. I continued my activities at the party organization until the Party was eliminated in 1998. All these years that I was in the Komsomol and the Party, the observation of any Jewish traditions was out of the question. Traditions were considered to be 'religious prejudices'. How stupid it was. Now I like to recall how we celebrated holidays in the colony, but our family didn't resume the celebration of holidays. We didn't return to Jewish traditions. Neither my daughter nor I observe any of them.

Perestroika began in the 1990s, and I didn't care much about the crash of communist ideas. I was hoping for a better future for the next generations. I haven't lost my ideals: I still believe that the ideas of communism are very good and correct. I think some people misinterpreted them in the wrong way. Communists are just people, too, and they can be wrong and make mistakes like any other person. Many things have changed. Ukraine declared independence, but I'm sorry about the huge and mighty multinational state that disintegrated. We can enjoy freedom of the press and freedom of speech. People can travel all over the world and have their own business. But old people have a hard life because their pensions are very low. I hope it will change in the future.

My daughter and her husband are pensioners now. Asia is at home and Alik still does some work every now and then. He is a highly qualified design engineer. Alla married her classmate, a very nice Russian boy. Asia and I had no objections to their marriage. Love and understanding is what matters. They get along very well. They own a car business. They have four sons, and they all are the joy and love of my life: Michael, named after his great-grandfather, is 18, Ilia is 15, Daniel is 10 and Leo, my closest friend, is 7 years old.

I will soon be 96, but I try to lead an active life: I help them to boil milk, dust my room and sometimes spend some time in the yard. I like to visit Hesed: I recite poems in Yiddish there. I have a hearing problem, and Hesed provided a hearing aid for me. I'm very concerned about the situation in Israel. I have many dear people who live there. I just hope that no other tragedy will strike my people. When the Iron Curtain [21](#) fell in the 1990s, and Jews got an opportunity to move to Israel, I was old. Who can move at 96 years of age? And my daughter and grandchildren have no plans to move, either. .

## Glossary

### **1 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.

## **2 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.

## **3 Gangs**

During the Civil War in 1918-1920 there were all kinds of gangs in the Ukraine. Their members came from all the classes of former Russia, but most of them were peasants. Their leaders used political slogans to dress their criminal acts. These gangs were anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic. They killed Jews and burnt their houses, they robbed their houses, raped women and killed children.

## **4 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **5 Collective farm (in Russian 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.

## **6 Russian stove**

Big stone stove stoked with wood. They were usually built in a corner of the kitchen and served to heat the house and cook food. It had a bench that made a comfortable bed for children and adults in wintertime.

## **7 Nestor Makhno, Nestor (1888-1934)**

One of the leaders of the anarchist/peasant movement in Southern Ukraine during the Civil War.

His troops, ranging from 500 to 35,000 members, marched under the slogans of 'State without Power' and 'Free Soviets'. They struggled against the Germans and the Soviet power and arranged anti-Semitic demonstrations and pogroms. The Red Army put an end to this movement and Makhno emigrated in 1921.

## **8 Russian Revolution of 1917**

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

## **9 Komsomol**

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

## **10 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during WWI. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

## **11 Struggle against religion**

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

## **12 Rabfak**

Educational institutions for young people without secondary education, specifically established by the Soviet power.



### **13 Collectivization**

In the late 1920s - early 1930s private farms were liquidated and collective farms established by force on a mass scale in the USSR. Many peasants were arrested during this process. As a result of the collectivization, the number of farmers and the amount of agricultural production was greatly reduced and famine struck in the Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus, the Volga and other regions in 1932-33.

### **14 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

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

### **15 Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

### **16 Communal apartment**

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

### **17 Molotov, V**

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

## **18 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact**

Non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, which became known under the name of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Engaged in a border war with Japan in the Far East and fearing the German advance in the west, the Soviet government began secret negotiations for a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939. In August 1939 it suddenly announced the conclusion of a Soviet-German agreement of friendship and non-aggression. The Pact contained a secret clause providing for the partition of Poland and for Soviet and German spheres of influence in Eastern Europe.

## **19 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 antisemitic 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'.

## **20 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.

## **21 Iron Curtain**

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