

Irina Voinova

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St. Petersburg

Russia

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My paternal great-grandmother and great-grandfather were born and lived in Revel, Estonia.

After 1917 the city was called Tallinn. Great-grandpa's surname was Aizman.

Grandma and grandpa were born there, too. Who were Grandma and Grandpa? What was their profession? Their status? – of this I know nothing; I don't even know their names.

*But if my father was called Israel Borisovich, then, most likely, Grandpa was named Boris.
I never knew either of them.*

They died before the Soviet regime came to power.

I was told, however, that they were very religious.

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- **My family background**

I've been told that in 1913 my dad, Israel Borisovich, two of his brothers, Leva and Grisha (Herman) and their cousin Anna Isaacovna left Revel and went off to St. Petersburg. My grandparents in Revel died at about the same time. Granny and Grandpa had 13 children, but I don't know anything about the ones who remained in Revel.

In 1914 the oldest brothers – Dad and uncle Leva – joined the army. Uncle Grisha didn't go with them as he was too young. He was probably born in 1902. Uncle Leva also fought in the Civil War and was a war hero. He was wounded in the spine and after this could not use his legs. He died in Leningrad during the blockade. He couldn't walk and was helpless.

Uncle Grisha worked at a tannery. After my parents were married, Uncle Grisha met Aunt Raya Ansher, my mother's sister, at our home, and in 1922 they got married. In 1923 they gave birth to their only son Borya, who at age 19 was killed at the front in Stalingrad in 1942 or 1943. He held the rank of senior lieutenant. Uncle Grisha himself also perished at the front, near Leningrad, when



he was 37.

During the war Aunt Raya worked as a hospital nurse at the hospital in Leningrad. I don't know what she did after the war. She died in Leningrad in 1983.

My maternal grandfather, Jakov Josifovich Ansher, was born in 1870 in Ponevezh, in Lithuania. He completed four grades of high school (gymnasium) and worked as a teacher in Ponevezh. Grandma, his wife, was called Khanna Mikhailovna. At some point Mom's family left for Petrograd. Here, in 1916 my mother met my father and they got married.

Granny and Grandpa stayed in Petrograd, where Grandpa worked at a tobacco factory as a mill-hand. In 1942, during the war, they were evacuated to Molotov (now Perm), where they remained until their deaths. They died in the 1950s, almost at the same time. They were religious people. I was told that Grandpa sang in the synagogue choir.

Granny and Grandpa had seven children. The eldest was Aunt Polya, Polina Jacovlevna. Then came my mom, Berta Jacovlevna; she was born in Ponevezh in 1900. Then came Aunt Raya, Uncle Jasha (Jakov), Uncle Borya, Aunt Lena and Aunt Roza. All the Ansher sisters were very beautiful.

I don't know if my mom ever studied anywhere, but she was very literate nonetheless. She wrote in Yiddish very well. Both my dad and mom's parents also wrote well in Yiddish. And Daddy, generally speaking, knew several languages very well, including Estonian, Hebrew, and German.

I was born on August, 18, 1926. My elder sister Lena was born in 1923. My brother Boris was born in 1925. Then came Zelda (we called her Zhenya), and Moses. We called him Mishenka. We were five children. All my brothers and sisters were born in Petrograd, but I was born in Perm. Most likely, Mom gave birth to me when she was visiting there for some reason.

Daddy was a tailor. He worked as a manager of a tailor shop. Clients went to him there, but some came to our home for fittings. They said of my Daddy: "Israel has magical hands."

Mom was a housewife, but she sewed at home as well, helping Dad. Once Dad had some large children's order – either for a school or for an orphanage. They were winter coats, I even recall that they were green. Mom sewed them at home. Our parents also sewed the clothes that we kids wore; they never bought any.

Mom was very religious. I always wondered why she didn't allow us sometimes to carry things from somewhere, and only now I realize that, most likely, it was Shabbat. She tried to keep all the traditions, but she went to synagogue only rarely and in secret from Daddy. Daddy never went to synagogue. He was a communist – I remember my relatives saying that Papa was a communist, and at that time everything was strict; a communist couldn't go to synagogue.

Mom had a small chest, and in it was a little velvet cap. She had some sort of small casket – she must have inherited these things from her parents. Once I dropped the casket – Mom was so upset; she kissed it and all the time whispered in Yiddish (she spoke Yiddish well).

Daddy and Uncle Grisha knew Kirov [Sergei Mironovich Kirov (1886 – 1934) – a prominent figure in the Communist Party, who was in charge of establishing Soviet power in the Caucasus, from 1926 – he was the secretary of the Leningrad Regional Party Committee from working in the party. I

remember very well when Kirov was shot in 1934. Uncle Grisha came in, they were sitting on the sofa and Daddy's eyes were full of tears. They took it very hard. Then for a few nights Dad slept in his clothes -- he expected they would come for him at any moment. At that time many people were shot. And Mom would go to Mishenka, - she would embrace him and cry. But everything turned out all right.

Dad for the always wore a greatcoat. And he had a long black overcoat as well; and he always wore spats. But he didn't carry any weapon.

Among themselves my parents spoke Yiddish. With us, well, sometimes they would shout at us both in Yiddish and in Russian. In childhood I understood everything but later forgot.

Our flat was situated in a big building that had several floors. We lived on the third floor, and Uncle Leva (Dad's brother) lived on the ground floor. Our family was poor. There was only one room in the flat, a big one - may be, of 40 square meters. There were beds and a big table. We all, seven people, lived in one room. We never had any nannies. Mom always cooked and cleaned up. She was a very orderly person.

We had a big ancient candelabra. Mum would light candles in it say, "Be quiet, don't get close to it and don't touch it." I also remember that we had a big white tiled fireplace at home, with a small mantelpiece. And also there was a big iron chest.

When we were little, we often had guests. We had a large table - we would sit at the table and sing (we sang Ukrainian songs, Mom liked them). Uncle Grisha and Dad would sing some Jewish songs in Yiddish. One person who visited us was a Jew with a humpback, who worked for Dad. There were also many Estonians, since dad was from Estonia. Usually, when guests came, we had to leave the table and sit separately.

Mom was very hospitable, and she was a good cook. Of the Jewish dishes she cooked, I remember tzimes, chicken necks, and stuffed fish. Always on [Passover] we had matzo. Mom would go to some place early in the morning and buy matzo. When Mom and Aunt Anya cooked chicken soup, they made matzo dumplings.

Mom died on May 23, 1937 as the result of an unsuccessful abortion. She is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Leningrad. I remember that she had a burial service in the synagogue of the Jewish cemetery. When Mom died she left 5 little children, one smaller the other. Dad was 42 years old, and he became sexually involved with an 18-year-old slut, an Estonian named Selma. He drove us to the country, to Elizavetino (near Leningrad), to her mother's place, and he and his girlfriend left us for somewhere. We didn't know where they went. (Later we learned that after the war in Tashkent he began living with a Burkharan Jewess.)

Selma's mother lived in a big one-story house, where there were a lot of children. They lived very poorly. There was no wallpaper on the walls. They treated us badly; I recall that they would add water to the milk they gave us - they even begrudged us milk. Who needed us, outsider kids! Our oldest sister, Lena, went out begging for us.

But we didn't live there long. After a few months we were all placed elsewhere. Zhenechka, Misha and I were put in orphanages - for some reason we were all sent to different ones. The older two,

Lena and Borya (Lena was 14 and Borya - 12) were sent to a vocational school in Krasnoe Selo, near Leningrad.

It was then that we completely lost touch with our youngest brother, Mishenka, who was 5 at the time. He sought us out only in 1955. I didn't recognize him at first. He had become an attractive young man with dark, curly hair.

I was at the orphanage for about a month. It was in summer. A lot of us lived in one room. I always sat in the corner, separately, constantly crying. I didn't want to eat anything and grew very thin; I missed Mom and Dad terribly. When Aunt Anya Feitelson, dad's cousin, came to see me, she was told: "If you want this child to live, take her away." So she and Uncle Vitya, her husband, took me in. Aunt Anya became my guardian, but they only took me. Maybe they didn't know where my brothers and sisters were. Or may be they did know but didn't want to assume such a responsibility and take anyone else.

Aunt Anya, Dad's cousin, Anna Isaacovna Aizman, had arrived in St. Petersburg from Revel in 1913 together with Dad and his two brothers. Her uncle, who was living there, adopted her in order to register her in his flat, where she took up residence. Aunt Anya was very beautiful, tall, svelte. She married Victor Gugovich Feitelson and on October, 26, 1927 they gave birth to a son, Gugo.

Gugo and I were born less than a year apart, and he was in the same class as I was at school. I wasn't really friends with him, but we played together. If Gugo offended me, then uncle Vitya took my side, but aunt Anya always stood up for Gugo.

I don't know what kind of education Aunt Anya had received, but she was very literate. She knew Yiddish, German, and Estonian well – she knew 5 or 6 languages altogether. She and Uncle Vitya were the managers of a drugstore. Aunt Anya and Uncle Vitya also spoke Yiddish, but they didn't celebrate any religious holidays.

• During the war

After Aunt Anya took me in, I began to go to school. I started in 1938. I entered third grade, because earlier I had gone to school when Mom was alive. I liked mathematics, the Russian language, dictation – they were my favorite subjects. I wasn't so good in English. I wanted to study, and later, in vocational school, I was always top of the class. I was always elected to be a class leader, and always worked hard.

I always got on well with the other children. We had a mathematics teacher – her name was Anna Ivanovna, who was a school superintendent. She loved me and felt sorry for me, and I was always teased that I was "Annushka's pet."

I went to enter vocational school in 1941. I was only 14, and they didn't want to accept me because I was too young. But Anna Ivanovna was at the entrance examination and stuck up for me, saying that I was an orphan. Thanks to her I was accepted. It was the First Vocational School attached to a ship's-mechanical factory. I specialized in studying to be an all-round turner. At the vocational school we were fed well, and they gave us greatcoats, skirts, jackets, shirts, and soldier's blouses.

Gugo died of starvation in 1942, during the blockade. He was picked up in the street and taken to the hospital, where he died.

During the blockade, Aunt Anya was very sick. She suffered from scurvy. In 1942, in the beginning of spring, I took her to the hospital. She had blue, swollen legs. But the hospital wouldn't take her. They said there was no room. I told her,

Aunt Anya, let's go home. But she told me, "

Run home and leave me here, on the porch. If somebody picks me up, - well, it will be good, if no - then so be it." So I went home, leaving her on the porch. It was cold. The next day I came - she wasn't there. I tried to find out what had happened to her, but nobody knew anything. I couldn't find her, so I decided she had died, and when uncle Vitya arrived that's what I told him. But as it turned out, she lost her memory and couldn't remember anything, even her name. She was evacuated somewhere, and then, after the war, her memory returned, and she came back home.

But I had told uncle Vitya that Aunt Anya had died, and in 1947 he re-married. His second wife's name was Fruma Naumovna. She was a Jew. During the war Aunt Fruma was at the front, and her mother and son remained in Belorussia (they lived in Belorussia, in Khatin). The Germans came there and took all the Jews together and led them off to be shot. Aunt Fruma's son, a little boy, bit a German in the hand and he grabbed him, fractured his spine and flung him into the pit. Most of Fruma's relatives were killed there. Those who were half dead were buried alive in the pit.

Only one sister survived (I don't remember her name). She was hiding in some little store-room, but she was betrayed later. A Russian politbay [that was the name for Russian people who agreed to work for the Nazis in the occupied territories and served as a police force, keeping "order" among civilians] came, grabbed her and took her to the commandant's office. Two Germans were ordered to take her aside to the bushes and to shoot her there. She was just 17, but she understood German. When they reached the place the Germans told her:

Daughter, you are young, beautiful, - run to the forest.

She replied:

Shoot me, why are you tormenting me?

They repeated: Run, you are young; we shall shoot; don't be afraid of it.

She recalled later,

"I moved away, saying Well, shoot!, and then I ran, thinking, Am I alive or not? I came running into the forest, fell, and only two days later regained consciousness and saw that I was alive."

In this way, she was saved by the Germans. What happened to those who hid her, she doesn't know, as she didn't go back. She ran away into the forest, and only then was found by our people in the forest.

Aunt Fruma and her husband were at the front at that time. Her husband was killed. She left for Leningrad and in 1947 she became involved with Uncle Vitya. She worked at the drugstore on Vasilyevsky island where he was the manager. They got married. But soon aunt Anya came back! She didn't want to stay in Leningrad, because her son had died there, and she asked Uncle Vitya to return with her to Estonia. Uncle Vitya said no. He himself was not from Estonia, and he felt that his life was in Leningrad. So he didn't leave. Aunt Anya returned to live - in Tallinn, in her homeland. That is where she died in 1972. And Uncle Vitya continued to live with Fruma in Leningrad. He died in 1982.

I lived at Aunt Anya's until the winter of 1942, when I was evacuated to Barnaul. They evacuated the people who were the sickest and weakest and said that as soon as we were well, we would be taken back to Leningrad. They transported us in cattle cars – these were goods wagons with plank beds. We probably traveled for two months, if not more. Once a day we were let out of the wagon as if we were a herd of cattle; they fed us with any old stuff they had (pea soup and something else) – and then were led back into the wagon.

There were only three girls in the group I was with – me, my friend Rosa Mutovkina and another girl – Sara. Some boys didn't like us because of our nationality [i.e. we were Jewish] and often were rude to us.

First we were taken to Aleisk, a town in the north, where we were driven to some club or palace of culture. We lived in this building for a few days and slept right on the floor, putting our kit-bags under our heads. We were given half a kilogram of bread a day and water – that's all. Several days later we were herded together and transported to Barnaul. The day after our arrival we were stripped of our clothes: they took away our greatcoats and new boots that had been distributed to us in the vocational school. In exchange they gave us quilted jackets – we called them something unprintable! – and boots with wooden soles.

We were settled in barracks. They had two-tiered bunk beds and one stove, called a “bourguika”. The windows were narrow and were situated at ground level. It was cold, dirty and damp there, we froze. We bought Valenki. Valenki were wet all the time. And if we put them into the stove to get dried – some burned up, some stayed wet all the same. And in the morning we had to put them on again and go to work, which was quite far away.

We worked at a plant that produced bullets. I worked as a turner. I was always a very good worker and was ahead of schedule. My photo was always posted on the board of honor. We worked for 16 or 18 hours a day. And sometimes we spent the nights in the workshop, because it was a very long way back to our barracks -- five or six kilometers on foot. In Barnaul the temperature was minus 40 degrees C0, and we were just in quilted jackets. Everybody's hands and legs were frostbitten. When we stayed at the workshop overnight we would hide somewhere under a short flight of stairs to sleep.

We were paid salaries for our work. We could go to the market, buy a head of cabbage and eat it raw. I remember that we also bought frozen milk. For bread we had ration cards – 800 grams of bread per day. We got cereal with ration cards, too, and there was also something else - I don't remember. It was quiet in Barnaul, it didn't feel as if there was a war on. People went about their daily lives. For some reason boys ran and sold water in glasses, a glass cost 10 kopecks. It was a hard life, but sometimes we arranged parties in the barracks; we sang, danced. We were young, we were only 15 to 20 years old.

• After the war

One day, while walking back from work, we accidentally found out that a military unit was going to Leningrad. And just as we were – without our belongings, without our documents, without any money – 16 of us ran and joined them.

I think that it again took something like two and a half months to reach Leningrad. Again we traveled in a cattle car. But the authorities were out looking for us. You see, we had deserted the munitions plant without permission. Once the train was stopped and they searched for us, searched through all the wagons. We ran and hid where we could. People helped us – they hid us and fed us. We met good people. Various types of people were traveling– including evacuees going to Leningrad and the military. There were some old Jews in our car. They had food, so from time to time they threw something to us. An old stout lady was sitting there, surrounded by mattresses, and I hid there, among the mattresses.

We all arranged to get off the train somewhere in the shunting depot and to meet at a certain time the next day near Smolny. Eleven of us kept the appointment, out of the 16 who had escaped. The other five were caught and taken off the train. They were probably sent to prison. We arrived in Leningrad in January 1945. The war was still on, but the blockade had already been broken. When I got there, my aunt had already left and our flat was occupied by someone else. I had nobody. I spent the first night at the Moscow railway station. And then I was taken to the flat by Roza Mutovkina – my girl-friend, with whom I escaped from Barnaul.

We were called to the Big House (the State Security Authority). They told that they would send all of us back and put us all in prison. But instead then they sent us to the FZO [factory-and-works school] and left us alone. It was 1945. Our documents and belongings were all in Barnaul, so I had to get new documents. My original documents stated my name as Frida Israilevna. For the new documents I decided to change my first name and patronimic, because both in the orphanage and in vocational school I had had a lot of problems because I was a Jew. I told them that I was Aizman Irina Georgievna, a Russian, in order for them to register me as a Russian. Since then, everyone I know has called me Irina Georgievna. Only my closest relatives know my real name, but they, too, call me Irina. The factory school was attached to the “Svetlana” plant. We lived in barracks belonging to this plant. I worked at “Svetlana” from 1945 until 1981, when I retired. I worked as a turner. Then I needed money – so I worked on a machine that refined mercury. It was probably the only machinelike it in the Soviet Union. It was brought from America.

Up to 1948 I lived in a hostel, and in 1948 those who wanted were given little rooms in wooden Finnish houses in Levashovo [near Leningrad]. From there we commuted quite a distance each morning to get to the plant, but on the other hand I had my own quarters. I got married and gave birth to two children there, and the four of us lived in this little room.

It was in Levashovo that I met my first husband, Grigory Grigorievich Kutakhov, whom I married in 1948. Born in 1911, he was Russian by nationality, born and bred in Leningrad. All his ancestors had been born in Leningrad. He worked as a motor mechanic. He was an anti-Semite but loved me and maintained very warm relations with my relatives. I lived with him for 22 years. In the late 1960s, my husband was in an accident. He was sick for a year and a half and died in 1970.

We had two children. Our the eldest son, Anatoly, was born in 1949. He is an engineer. His wife, Natasha, is Russian. They have two sons. The eldest, Alyosha, graduated from the Medical Institute and is a doctor. The second son, Tymofey, is studying at the Polytechnic Institute. He is 17. My second son, Leonid, was born in 1951. He is an engineer. His wife, Tanya, is also Russian. She is a hospital nurse. They have two children – Mashenka and Andryusha.

In 1952 I was allotted a room in the wooden house measuring 17 square meters. It was only in 1957 that I was allotted a room in a communal flat in Leningrad – 18 square meters. Four families – 15 souls – like in this communal flat. We lived in a good way, peacefully, our relations with one another were very good.

In 1971 I remarried. My second husband's name is Mikhail Erofeevich Voinov. He was born in 1925 in Ukraine, in the Chernigovskaya region. For his entire working life, until he retired, he worked at the Kirovsky Plant as a motor mechanic. He is a Ukrainian, but he had a relative named Mikhail Isaacovich [i.e., a Jew]. Misha has a high respect to people, he is very learned and has a very good personality.

[Irina Georgievna Vojnova lives with her husband, Mikhail Voinov, in a small, cozy flat. Their children and grandchildren have their own homes but maintain close relations with them. In their flat everything is neat and clean. In the room on the wall hangs a big portrait of Sergey Esenin.

Irina Georgievna is 75. She is short and neatly dressed; she looks very good. She gets up at 8 o'clock each morning. Irina Georgievna is a very charming woman who enjoyed my visit. She was eager to answer my questions. She wants very much for the memory of her relatives to be preserved. Except for those photos that she held most dear, she gave me her pictures without wanting them to be returned, in hopes that we would be able to preserve them better than she could.]