

Emma Balonova

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Russia

Interviewer: Natalia Vassilyeva

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I met Emma Mikhaylovna Balonova in her room in the communal apartment [1](#), situated in the center of Petersburg. Emma Mikhaylovna is short and active.

She is slope-eyed, she looks very young. Emma Mihaylovna is that kind of person in a thousand who attracts attention of her interlocutor from the first minutes of dialogue.

Her relatives, friends, former colleagues, and neighbors - they all love Emma Mikhaylovna very much.

All her life long Emma Mihaylovna had to overcome hardships. Misfortunes followed her. She lost her younger son and her beloved husband.

But she kept optimism, interest in surroundings, and desire to be useful to people.

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- **My family background**

I know about my paternal great-grandmother and great-grandfather almost nothing. I only know that my paternal relatives lived in Belarus, Lithuania and Latvia. In Belarus there is a small town Polotsk. My father often told us about their life in Polotsk, about his father and grandfather.

According to father, they lived very poorly, almost in abject poverty. If my memory does not fail me, my father's father and grandfather taught Jewish children in cheder.

Parents paid for their children's studies, but only those parents who were able to do it. The total sum was beggarly, because all Jews there were poor. But my father's father and grandfather had no other profession. Well, and my great-grandmother kept their house.

I visited my grandmother and grandfather only once. At that time we lived in Minsk, and Daddy made a business trip to Polotsk. He took me with him to show me grandmother and grandfather, to



introduce me to them. I do not remember the date when it happened. I remember that I was very little. I also remember their big wooden house, where they lived with their children. They had a lot of children: 6 or 7.

Family of my paternal grandfather was very religious. My grandfather held a post in the synagogue. I do not know how it was called, but I know that he assisted rabbi.

He had payes and a long beard. And he never was bare-headed. His name was Israel Kalmyk. He was a long-liver: he died when he was over 90 years old.

My grandfather did not serve in the army. Grandfather's first wife Sore-Zelde Kalmyk died early in life, and he married for the second time. His second wife took care of her own children and the children of her husband and was nice to all of them absolutely equally.

For example, my father got to know that he was brought up by a stepmother when he was already an adult. She was a very good woman! It is a pity that I do not remember her name.

My daddy left home when he was very young, and began to earn his living. He was not educated: finished only cheder, but he was a person of capacity. He had very good memory, and he was gifted in general. He coached pupils from rich families, helped them to get prepared for school, and then to span gaps in their knowledge.

His name was Mendel Kalmyk. He was born in 1897 in Vilno region. He died in Gorky in 1943 in evacuation.

Regarding my mother's parents I know even less. You see, they both died very early in life. They had 11 children, and all of them became orphans.

My mother's father was called Rafael-Abram (Jewish name Folye-Avrom). It is interesting that Mum had a sister Nekhama, they were twins. And you see, on my mother's tomb it is written Sofiya Abramovna, and on my aunt's one Nekhama Rafaelovna.

My Mum Sofiya Balonova was born in 1895 in Vilno region, too. She died of cancer in 1946 in Leningrad.

The rest of my maternal relatives I remember better, because all of them are my relatives twice: I married the son of my mother's brother, i.e. my mother's nephew or my cousin.

My mother's family lived in Riga. As I already told you, parents died early in life and children had to make their own way in life. Riga was a big European city. There lived very rich families, most of them were German. Many girls, including mother's sisters, worked for rich German families making clothes for all family members. My mother-in-law and her sisters did the same when they were young. They also lived in Riga.

My mum's brother Yakov was a very qualified shoemaker. He had a great success making shoes. He also lived in Riga. By that time managers of a shoe factory in Petersburg decided to improve their production process making better footwear. They wanted to invite highly skilled experts. Several managers from that factory came to Riga to find the best shoemakers.

Among others, they invited my uncle, who became my future father-in-law. By that time he was already married to my future mother-in-law and they had a son (my future husband) Isaac Yakovlevich Balonov. They considered themselves to be lucky, when Isaac got an invitation to the Petersburg factory: they did not want to remain in Riga as they were disquieted by rumors of the coming war, they had temptation to go to Russia.

The factory gave them a good apartment, and their family settled there. Later Yakov's younger sister Emma came to their place too.

My Mum lived in Petersburg since she was a young girl, but I do not know the way she got there. Unfortunately at present there is nobody to ask about it. I guess her brother and his wife invited her to live with them. I remember that sometimes she spoke about her work at a knitting factory when she was very young.

My future mother-in-law and her sister were very good dressmakers. At that time my father lived in Vilno, he arrived in Petersburg on a business trip and met Emma. They fell in love with each other and were going to get married. But it went ill with them: the bride got sick with typhus and died. According to Jewish laws Daddy had to marry her sister, my Mum.

Daddy named me Emma in honor of his lost bride. You may consider their marriage to be a shotgun one, but they lived in harmony all life long. I guess they got married in Belarus. I do not know exactly, but Mum and Daddy left for Belarus as a groom and a bride. I guess my parents did not marry in the synagogue: by that time Daddy already was a bellicose atheist.

My father served in the tsarist army. I know no details about his service, but once father's photo in his uniform stroke my eye. He told me that he took that photograph before leaving for the army. By the way, during his service in the army father had been ill with typhus and lost his hair. Since then he had to cut his hair close to the skin. People thought that he did it in conformity with the latest revolutionary fashion of those years.

Having got married, my parents lodged in a small town in Belarus (I've forgotten its name). Soon they moved to Minsk. And I was born on April 17, 1920 in Vitebsk. Mum did not want to give birth in Minsk, because she was afraid that father would not allow arranging bar mitzvah for the newborn boy (she was sure a boy would be born). But it was me who was born, and our family remained in peace: I already told you that my father was an atheist.

When he was a child, he used to sing at the synagogue because he had got a good voice, but when he grew up, at the age of 19, he broke with religion and became a communist. He always told me and my sisters that there was no God. And it went without saying that our family members could arrange no bar mitzvah for newborn boys.

Through habit I go on saying my sisters, but in fact I had only one sister. Now I'll tell you how my second sister appeared in our family. In 1921 in Samara people starved and suffered from cholera epidemic. Two Mum's sisters lived there, they both died during that epidemic. One of them left 3 little children; each of them was taken by the families of their uncles and aunts in order to avoid children's home.

That was why Mum's niece lived in our family as mother's sister. But unfortunately 4 children of the other Mum's sister got to a children's home somewhere in Belarus. From time to time my Mum took them home, and we made good friends. They were always hungry and ragged.

Once I even got frightened, when I went out and saw a dirty child in the street (it happened in Minsk). I came back home and said 'Mum, I am afraid to go out, there is a homeless boy over there.' When that boy came into our court yard, I recognized my cousin David. Later he appeared to be a very talented person; he graduated from the Leningrad University through a correspondence course and became a school director. Everybody loved him very much.

My younger sister Klara was born in 1923, and my elder cousin sister was born in 1912. Her name was Mirra Goman.

My father joined the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party of bolsheviks in 1919 and soon became a professional Party worker. [The Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party (of bolsheviks) appeared in 1917. In March 1918 it was renamed the Russian Communist Party, in 1925 renamed All-Union Communist Party, and in 1952 - Communist Party of the Soviet Union.] He worked there almost all his life long, only in his later years he became a director of the Evening Pedagogical Institute in Gomel.

In Minsk he worked as the first secretary of MOPR [2](#).

• Growing up

I can't recall very well our apartment in Minsk. For some reason now I can hardly recall our family life. I guess we rented a small house. Our neighbors were Belarusian families. We all lived in peace and friendship despite different nationalities. I do not remember anybody coming to oblige. Otherwise Mum would have not sent me to the kindergarten. I liked my kindergarten.

The only crumpled rose-leaf was absence of my sister Klara there: she was too little for it. I cried so bitterly that they allowed her to attend my kindergarten with me as a guest.

In Minsk I went to school, and studied there 5 years. We studied Belarusian language and loved that subject very much. As a result, we spoke it very well, we could read and write in Belarusian language. We were also interested in Belarus literature and knew many poems by heart.

What an odd mixture is human memory! I do not remember the number of rooms in our apartment, but can recall some political events clearly.

Probably it was connected with my father's work. Well, in 1927 two Italian communists Sacco and Vanzetti were executed because they were communists and were in touch with the Soviet government.

[Nikola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italians by birth were workers and revolutionaries in the USA. In 1920 they were charged in murder, brought in a verdict of guilty and sentenced to death penalty.]

In Minsk there took place a great manifestation of protest against that execution. I remember the large square in the central district of Minsk. It was overcrowded with people carrying banners and slogans. Leaders of the city mounted the rostrum, and my father was among them. He even made a speech. And he took me (what a mercy!) with him to the rostrum. It was impossible to be forgotten!

My elder sister was a very active member of the Komsomol organization [3](#). At the Officers' House there was a local Komsomol organization.

Its members arranged different recreational events: dancing, choral singing, theater performances. Sometimes my sister took me there, and I enjoyed it very much. In summer my elder sister used to work in pioneer camps as a pioneer leader.

[Pioneer camps were out-of-town establishments for children - members of the Pioneer Organization [4](#).]

She always took me with her. But mum never allowed my younger sister to go with us, because her health was very poor: at the slightest provocation she immediately fell sick.

At my school in Minsk I had 2 friends: Sara and Rachel. We remained true friends till now. After we graduated from our colleges, one of us moved to Moscow, another one stayed in Minsk, and I moved to Leningrad, but we visited each other every year. By the way they came to me on the occasion of my wedding in 1940.

In 1932 when I was 12 we moved to Gomel. At that time my younger sister was 9 years old, and my elder sister was already 20. She entered a technical school. [Technical schools appeared in the USSR to prepare employees of middle level for industrial, agricultural and other organizations.]

In spite of the fact that Daddy was a Communist Party worker, we lived in a communal apartment. At that time party workers had no privileges in compare with benefits which appeared later on. We lived in a four-room apartment: 2 rooms were occupied by us, 2 rooms - by our neighbor.

Our rooms were very large; we also had a vast balcony. The apartment was very good. There was central heating, but we heated our bathroom with firewood. I remember Daddy chopping firewood. It is interesting that in our apartment there was a big Russian stove [5](#). Mum always made very tasty pies, because Russian stove was very good for baking.

Mum did everything about the house and my elder sister helped her. My younger sister and I never assisted them. When I was a child I washed not a single handkerchief myself. Parents told us that we had to study, and that was all. The only assistant to Mum was a laundress, who came to us once a week: she used to work all day long.

Our neighbor sang fairly well: she appeared in concert halls with Jewish songs. I also sang delightfully, therefore she started teaching me to sing Jewish songs. And I knew the language, because I lived in a Jewish city.

In Gomel we lived in one of the central streets in a big house. In Gomel there lived many Jews. There were no special Jewish zones of residence: one could hear people speaking Yiddish all over the city. I do not remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism, I do not remember anybody

talking about nationalities. The same was at my school: we never discussed it.

We chose friends following different preferences, but we never thought about nationality. One day when we were already adult, we tried to recollect who of our classmates was Jewish, but did not manage. I remember the synagogue in Gomel, but nobody of our acquaintances visited it. The synagogue building was a big, uncared-for, painted dark grey. I never got in.

Besides the secondary school, I attended a musical one. Therefore I could not spend all my time with my friends though I wished to: all my school friends did their homework and were able to do anything they wanted till the next day. As for me, every evening I had to go to my musical school. But on holidays and days off we visited each other at home, listened to music.

All my friends (especially when they grew up) liked to discuss political topics with my Daddy. Daddy used to deliver public lectures on international situation. A great number of people gathered to listen to him; his speech used to come across very well. By the way, my father could speak Yiddish, Russian and Belarusian languages very well.

All of us liked our form-master (a teacher of chemistry) very much. Her name was Nina Fominichna Guseva. She was very strict, but very good. Half of our class became enthusiastic about chemistry and entered chemical colleges (and I was one of them). Here you see what a large part a teacher can play in the life of their pupils!

We never celebrated Jewish holidays. We even did not celebrate the New Year day. Our favorite holiday was November 7 [Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution - the main state holiday in the USSR] and May 1 [the Day of the International Solidarity of Workers - the state holiday in the USSR].

On that days Daddy always took us to take part in demonstration. In Gomel there was a very good drama theatre. Moscow theater troupes often gave performances on tour there - we never missed them. Daddy had free-of-charge pass to all theatres. But most of all we liked when Daddy was at home with us, we considered it to be a great holiday. We loved him very much and never called him father, only Daddy.

I remember that when we lived in Gomel, Daddy often went to Moscow on business trips. In order to reach the railway station he always took a cab. We (Mum, my sisters and me) always went to the station together with him. At the railway station there was a very good restaurant and before the train departure we all used to have supper there, then saw off Daddy and walked back home. The railway station was situated not far from our house, but we liked to keep that order.

In the summer we used to go on vacation to one of nearby communes. [Agricultural communes were first created in 1917 by workers and farm laborers (they worked together). It was a form of agricultural production co-operative, later (in 1930s) Soviet authorities transformed them into collective farms.]

When the commune members got to know that my Daddy was a Communist Party worker, they asked him to be their adviser, to help them solve various problems. He easily made friends with people; he was a highly educated person, easy to get along with and had a good sense of humor.

Among the important political events of that time I remember the murder of Kirov [6](#). That murder initiated the Great Terror [7](#). Late at night some people from the local Communist Party committee came to us, woke my father and said that Kirov had just been killed in Leningrad. It was like a bolt from the blue.

Daddy jumped out of bed, dressed quickly and left. Later in 1937 mass arrests and executions began. Daddy was not arrested by pure accident. Later we got to know that he was in the list, but he was lucky to be at the bottom of it. By that time Yezhov [8](#) was already dethroned and executed by shooting in Moscow, and after that many cases were closed. But many of our acquaintances were arrested and lost during that period, including the best teachers from our school.

I finished ten-year secondary school in Gomel and got only excellent marks. Having got excellent school-leaving certificate pupils were exempt from entrance examinations. I sent my documents to the Leningrad Technological College and became a student of the chemical department.

In August I arrived in Leningrad for interviewing. They placed me in the hostel, and I did not come back to Gomel any more (it was rather expensive to go from Leningrad to Gomel and back). Do you know the song 'Daddy was a man of honor, but of a very modest income'? You see, these words could be said about my Daddy.

So my life far away from my family began. But in Leningrad I was not lonely: there lived my uncle Yakov (at that time I did not know that he would become my father-in-law). I visited my uncle every Saturday. I made friends with Maria, my cousin. And my cousin Isaac did not live at home: he was a military man.

He was much elder than me, and in 1936 he graduated from the 1st Medical College in Leningrad. [The St. Petersburg Medical University (former College) named after Pavlov was founded in 1897.] Among the students of their group there were 3 boys, after graduation they all were called up for military service. Isaac served near Leningrad.

Almost every Saturday he came home, bought theater tickets for me and Maria, gave us money to buy cakes. Later he started going to theatres and concerts together with us. It seemed to me that he treated me like a child. One day before his long business trip, he asked me 'Will you marry me?' I answered 'Yes!' I thought it was a joke.

Next day he left. And later I received a letter from him, where he wrote that he would be happy to marry me. Only then I understood it was not a joke, but that day I had to start on my destiny.

One boy from Gomel studied together with me in the College. We were friends at school, came to Leningrad together. People around us thought that we were going to get married. He always accompanied me wherever I went; but suddenly he noticed that several times I visited the same apartment. He asked me 'Is that your brother you visit there?'

Later I got married, but I it was too much for me to tell him about my wedding. Therefore I asked my friend to inform him about my marriage. He cried and left our College, because it was above his strength to see me there. Later he became a doctor.

- **During the war**

I finished 2 courses, and the war burst out. On July 19, 1942 the College was evacuated to Kazan, we studied and worked there. Some faculties organized production of saccharin. As for me, I worked at the faculty of pyrotechnics; there we were engaged in getting of phosphorus. It was a harmful and dangerous process. Every day I received a small amount of butter and 2 spoons of granulated sugar. It supported my organism a little.

In general, we lived in poverty. For dinner they gave us 2 spoons of mashed peas (we liked it very much). We added there an onion and ate it with a piece of brown bread. We received worker's cards, therefore it was impossible to die having 800 g of bread a day.

Every Sunday together with my friend we went to the market and bought half a kilogram of potatoes, boiled it, ate and drank the water. Till now I can't permit myself pouring out water, where I had boiled potatoes. So, we lived that way, but it couldn't be helped! In Leningrad people starved more [9](#). We knew it for sure, because a lot of us had relatives there...

Winters were very hard in Kazan. And we had almost no clothes to put on. The Kazan girls had valenki. [Valenki - winter boots made of milled wool.] And so we wore those valenki by turns. I was lucky: I had a winter coat with me. When we were at the railway station going to leave for Kazan, my mother-in-law almost threw it in my hands by force.

I remember that I was very indignant at it 'It is summer now, the war will be finished in 3 or 4 months, why should I take it with me?' And she answered 'If you don't need it, give it somebody as a present. And now take it please, don't refuse, do as I ask you.' So I took it, because it would have been in bad taste to refuse. Till now I cannot understand, how she managed to find me that day at the overcrowded railway station. She also brought me a wadded blanket.

It is incumbent upon me to mention that in Kazan we were received very well, though a lot of colleges were evacuated there. We never heard a word of reproach, while in fact not everywhere evacuated people were met affably. We were lodged in the large basement of Kazan Chemical and Technological College. They placed there a hundred beds and a hundred bedside-tables. It was very warm there, that's why I did not unpack my blanket.

In 1943 or 1942 they sent us to dig entrenchments [during the war all people able to work were mobilized for earthwork construction around the cities]. At that moment I called my blanket to mind and took it with me. We were lodged in a premise with an earthen floor and I decided to unpack my blanket. I undid the package and saw a blanket in a snow-white blanket cover.

And you see, the blanket cover was beautifully embroidered. Well, the girls saw it and immediately nicknamed me Countess Balonova. They called me Countess all the time we were together.

My parents and sisters were evacuated in Gorky [Nizhniy Novgorod at present]. At the beginning of the war people lost each other, nobody knew where their relatives left for. Only later we gradually began to learn about the destiny of our relatives. In Gorky my father died. He caught a cold, because they left in haste practically without clothes and had no money to purchase winter clothes.

His disease had lung complication and he died of pneumonia, because it was impossible to get penicillin at that time. And my younger sister served in the army. She was mobilized as soon as they arrived in Gorky.

She served all the war long, and after the victory day they got aboard big lorries and started eastwards. In their battalion there were only women. They all thought they were going to be demobilized. But they went on moving eastward through Moscow, through Urals, through Siberia. When they understood that they were not going home, they started shouting, crying. It appeared that Japan drifted into war [10](#). So my sister had enough time to fight there till the end of the war. She was there together with her future husband (he was their commander).

And my husband's family remained in the besieged Leningrad. He managed to help them bringing food, because he served nearby. His sister Maria served in the same medical unit. One day he brought his mother a pork chop, and she said 'Isaac, I never ate pork, so do you think now in my old age I shall eat it? Don't feel hurt, but I won't do it.' She was very courageous and did not allow her relatives to lose heart. She forced them to get up in the morning, did not allow them to go to bed in the afternoon, and made them change linen and wash whenever it was possible.

In spring of 1943 I graduated from the College. They gave me my diploma written on the yellow parcel paper. They offered me to choose a place of work: Dzerzhinsk near Gor'kiy or Zagorsk near Moscow. I chose Zagorsk, because I hoped to see my husband one day before the end of the war. I hoped that they would send him to Moscow on a business trip. You see, at that time my husband served as a medical officer near Leningrad.

The factory I worked at produced gunpowder and colored smokeless pistol-flare-lights for the front. Earlier I never saw gunpowder, and in Zagorsk I kept the keys to powder-shop. Imagine what serious responsibilities I accepted! Colored pistol-flare-lights were used first of all as a signal system and a means of communication.

For example, the red rocket was a signal to take the offensive, and the green one - to retreat. Therefore it was very important that shipment of red pistol-flare-lights never contained green ones. You see, it could cost thousands of soldiers and officers their lives.

My dream to meet my husband soon came true. He had to accompany a badly wounded pilot to Moscow. From Moscow he came to me (to Zagorsk). I cried all the night long: I was very happy to meet my husband and very sorrowful to part again. Soon I moved to Leningrad and gave birth to my eldest son Mikhail.

In 1944 Soviet armies liberated Baltic republics. My husband served in air-units and participated in liberation. He was left there to serve. I left my factory and moved to my husband together with my newborn son. Once at night some person called my husband and informed about unconditional surrender of Germany.

Early in the morning all Tallin citizens were in the Ratusha square, the main square of Tallin. They were dancing, embracing, crying, singing. They did not care about nationalities: Russians, Estonians, Jews were together there. It was impossible to be forgotten!

In Tallin we had a neighbor Anna Ernestovna. She was a remarkable woman, a real heroine. Such people are worth monuments; let my story about her be that monument.

- **After the war**

When the war burst out, Anna Ernestovna lived in Pskov. Near Pskov Germans brought down a Soviet airplane, one of its pilots was wounded, managed to survive and reached Anna's house by crawling. She hid him in the cellar. Above them in the same house there lived German officers. Every evening some girls visited them, they danced. And Anna told us 'If only they knew that they danced on the floor under which there was a Soviet pilot whom they could not find!'

Anna took care of him, fed him, and bandaged his wounds. When he recovered, he said 'Anna Ernestovna, thank you ever so much, now I'll go to find my relatives, they live in Pskov.' She answered 'Don't go, Germans will catch you, look around!' - 'No, I'll do it secretly.' Several hours later somebody knocked at the door. She opened it and saw 2 Germans and the pilot. He was beaten within an inch of his life: she even could not recognize him! Anna always cried telling that story! It turned out that Germans caught the pilot, beat him and forced to show the house where Anna was hiding him.

So Anna, her husband and 2 their daughters were taken away into the concentration camp. On their way to the camp her husband died of gangrene. Germans moved them from camp to camp in Poland and Germany. Americans liberated them from Buchenwald [11](#). Anna Ernestovna also had 2 sons. They were at the front line: one of them was on our side and the other one was with Germans (in Pskov Germans forced him to become their soldier).

I told Anna Ernestovna about a beautiful song An Yiddish Mother, and my husband (he was a fighter for equal rights) said 'Why only a Yiddish mother? And what about the other mothers?' And Anna Ernestovna answered 'Isaac Yakovlevich, when they brought us to the camp, all mothers had the right to take their little children with them. But Jewish mothers were not allowed to do it. If they ran after their children, Germans shot them. That is why there is a song about Jewish mother.'

When Americans liberated Buchenwald, they equipped barracks, where camp prisoners were waiting for departure for different countries, with radio. In the barrack of Soviet prisoners they listened to Soviet broadcast. And Anna Ernestovna who suffered knowing nothing about her sons, suddenly heard 'Listen to the orchestra under the baton of Anatoly Gashnik.' So she got to know that her elder son was alive.

Anna Ernestovna vowed to adopt an orphan, if her sons survive the war. After the end of the war she went to Pskov and went through the process of adoption of a boy whose parents were lost. She changed his name to Anatoly (her elder son's name), therefore she had got 2 sons named Anatoly. After that her son came to Tallin to his mother and sisters and settled in our apartment, too. We made good friends with him. Soon he became a dean of the Tallin conservatory.

And that son of hers who served in the German army also survived the war. He was found in Germany, in Danzig by a friend of Anna Ernestovna: she sent her a press-cutting with an announcement about his engagement. He was afraid to write his mother: he thought (not without good reason) that it could be dangerous for her. Only many years later he came to meet his mother.

In Tallin we lived about four years. After that my husband was sent to Germany. I did not go with him, because at that time authorities did not allow wives to go abroad together with their husbands. In Germany they started activities of the Soviet military government, where Soviet

people worked to plant soviet ideas.

My husband had to teach Germans soviet methods of health protection. He said 'God forbid them to learn it! For a hundred years we can be only dreaming about their level of public health service.' While Isaac served in Germany, my son and I lived in Leningrad. I worked in the Institute of Toxicology.

In 1952 my husband returned from Germany and was assigned to Ukraine. I went with him. Of course our son was with us. In Ukraine they moved my husband from one place to another. During 6 years we changed 5 places of residence. We lived in Kremenchug, in Uman, and I even have forgotten names of the rest places.

In Kremenchug I taught chemistry at school. But soon I had to leave the school, because by that time there came children born during the war time. Number of such children was very small, that was why a lot of teachers were fired, first of all those ones who had no pedagogical certificate. And I was among them. In Kremenchug in 1955 my younger son Yakov was born.

During his work in Ukraine (and during his life) my husband was never oppressed because of nationalistic reasons. Possible reason was my husband's great scholarship, compliance and sense of humor. He always easily made friends with people.

In 1958 my husband got demobilized and we returned to Leningrad as a family of four. My husband went to the State College for Advanced Training of Doctors. [The State College for Advanced Training of Doctors was the first in the world educational institution for improvement of doctors' skill.

It was founded in 1924.] He wanted to get a specialty of radiologist. To tell the truth, he had already got it. You see, serving in Germany he did not drink vodka every evening (like others), but spent his spare time with his friend who worked in the local hospital. His friend was a radiologist; he taught my husband fine points of his profession.

In Leningrad he studied at the advanced training courses for half a year and got a certificate of radiologist. And he worked in one of the Leningrad hospitals as a radiologist for about 30 years. We all lived at my mother-in-law in her large five-room apartment. She put a room at our disposal. And I went to work at the Chemical and Pharmaceutical College.

There I worked 5 years. But before I went there, I made an attempt to return to the Institute of Toxicology, where I worked earlier. I did not go to its personnel department; I addressed my former laboratory head directly. He said 'You'd better find some other place to work now, but when it becomes easier from the certain viewpoint, I'll call you, and you will come.' It was absolutely clear for me what he was talking about: at that time they were not permitted to take Jews.

He called me 5 years later (in 1964), during the so called Khrushchev Thaw [12](#). I came to the Institute and worked there till 1979. I had the right to retire on pension at the age of 45 (because we worked with chemical agents dangerous to health, though pension age in the USSR and in Russia was 55), but I worked 14 years more. I came across no manifestations of anti-Semitism: I worked under very pleasant conditions, though I knew that it was practically impossible for a Jew to find work in our Institute.

It is interesting to mention that a veto was put only on newcomers of Jewish nationality. In the institute there worked a lot of Jews, almost all of them occupied leading positions: managed laboratories, directed scientific investigations, etc. I retired on pension in 1979, and did not work any more.

As in our Institute we worked with chemical agents dangerous to health, each employee received a free-of-charge place in any recreational center he liked one time in 4 years [13](#). But every year we used to go for vacation to the South: sometimes to Crimea, sometimes to the Caucasus.

During the year we saved money to have an opportunity to go for vacation in summer. My sister's husband was military (a colonel), he was one of the major executives and used to go for vacation to very good sanatoria every year. Being in sanatorium, he used to find and rent an apartment for his wife, his son, my little children and me. When my children grew up, they started spending summer holidays in sports camps.

Certainly in our family we did not observe Tradition in the full sense of the word. But we always celebrated Jewish holidays and never ate pork. We began buying ham only when my mother-in-law died. Nobody was such a light hand for matzah flour dishes as my sister-in-law. And my mother-in-law was a real master in stuffing fish!

All of us wanted to educate our hands to it: we breathed down her neck watching, and then tried to repeat. No, we never managed. My mother-in-law always put on the table horseradish sauce (to eat it with fish). We used to make horseradish sauce ourselves. We tried to make everything ourselves, not to buy.

First, it was tastier to make yourself, and second, we never had money to spare. Our house was open for friends. When we were young, my husband's friends often visited us, and we all drew round the table and had dinner. But on holidays we did not invite guests, we liked to be in the family circle.

My son Mikhail was born in 1944 and Yakov in 1955. They were very good children. We had no problems with them, we always understood each other. They both were good sportsmen. The younger son was a volleyball player (he had a sports category), and the elder one went in for boxing and weightlifting.

Since he was an eight-class pupil, Mikhail spent each minute of his spare time reading serious scientific books on nuclear physics. He always studied extremely well. At school he had no problems connected with his nationality, excluding one case. My elder son never fought (he was not a fighter by nature). And suddenly I got to know that he had beaten a boy from his class. I asked him what happened.

Mikhail told me the following 'Mum, he called me a dirty Jew, and I (in presence of our classmates expressing full approval of it) pushed his face in.'

When he finished his school, Mikhail expressed a wish to enter either the Leningrad University or Polytechnical College [these higher educational institutions were among the best ones in the country]. But he understood how difficult it would be for him to enter [in the USSR higher educational institutions often did not accept Jews, the Polytechnical College in Leningrad was one

of them]. Therefore he became a student of the Shipbuilding College.

He finished the 1st course and came to a dean of the Polytechnical College. He showed him his student's record-book (there were only excellent marks in it). Mikhail asked the dean if it was possible to change my College for the Polytechnical one having such marks. The dean looked at his marks and at Mikhail (he was fair-haired and did not look like a Jew) and said that they would be glad to have him as their student if he would pass through 3 extra examinations.

My son got 3 excellent marks and came to the dean again. Later Mikhail told me that the dean looked sadly at his passport, where his nationality was written in black and white. But he appeared to be a decent person and did not take his word back.

Yakov also studied at the Polytechnical College. Since his earliest childhood he was crazy about cars. So he did not graduate from the College, left therefrom and became a taxi driver. He was happy. Sometimes he picked me up after his work to bring me somewhere I needed. I said 'Yakov, you have already worked 14 hours, have a rest now.' And he answered 'Mum, now I'll have a rest at the driver's seat.' Yakov died early in his life from heart disease. And Mikhail works in Vienna now, he had been working there for 7 years.

He signed a contract with the International Agency for Atomic Energy. You know that 20 years ago there happened Chernobyl disaster [Chernobyl disaster was the largest damage of nuclear power station in the history of mankind: it resulted in atmospheric contamination in all European countries], and Mikhail was an expert in that sphere.

At present they invite him from all over the world. Recently he went to Washington to give a report and was awarded a medal for it. Mikhail is a very touching boy. When he earned high money, he told me 'Mum, I know that you dreamed to see Paris since childhood.' And he bought us (my sister and me) tickets to Paris and we visited it indeed. Can you imagine it?

Political events never left me indifferent. To tell the truth, it was difficult to remain indifferent: Doctors' Plot, for instance [14](#). One morning we got up and heard the official communiqué by radio. They said that doctors treated our leaders incorrectly, poisoned them, therefore our dear leaders died. We grew cold with terror.

You remember that my husband was a doctor, he knew all the listed doctors very well. He had no doubt about their high professionalism and understood that a doctor would never commit such a crime. Almost all listed families were Jewish, so the true purpose of that action was beyond any doubt. We understood that the government authorized pogroms. Everybody became disrespectful to Jews.

One day a soldier came to my husband for medical consultation. My husband asked him to undress to the waist, but the soldier became confused and suddenly said 'Comrade major, they say that now Jewish doctors will not treat us, but poison.' You see, it was terrible.

Many people say that they were very sad for Stalin's death. I also grieved, I thought 'Why did he die so late?! Why didn't it happen 10 or 20 years ago? We would have been much happier!'

Regarding the Hungary revolution [15](#) and the Prague spring [16](#): I did not trust our newspapers. I understood that it was a scandal to interfere in affairs of other countries. It was shocking and impudent!

I was very much pleased with victories of Israel in its wars [17, 18]. I guess that no Jew was indifferent at that time.

When Perestroika was initiated, I admired Gorbachev [19](#). We could not even imagine that we would live to see, for example, the fall of the Berlin wall. [Berlin Wall was erected in 1961 to separate Western and Eastern parts of Berlin in Germany. It was demolished in 1989.]

Not many of our friends have left for Israel: 4 or 5 families. We were never going to emigrate. I was afraid of the heat, and my husband always said (for some reason) 'Don't even start talking to me about it.' His work was always very important for him, probably he was not sure to find work there.

I am connected with the Jewish community of St. Petersburg for the most part through the Hesed Avraham Welfare Center [20](#). I receive 3 or 4 food packages a year. Sometimes they offer me clothes: once I got good winter boots, next time - a knitted suit. Recently they brought me a huge package with bed linen.

I never received help from other countries.

- **Glossary:**

1. Communal apartment: The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades.

Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

2. MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters): Founded in 1922, and based on the decision of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, the organization aimed to protect workers from the terrorist attacks of the Whites and help the victims of terrorism. It offered material, legal and intellectual support to political convicts, political emigrants and their families.

By 1932 it had a membership of about 14 million people.

3. 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.

4. All-Union pioneer organization: a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

5. 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.

6. Kirov, Sergey (born Kostrikov) (1886-1934): Soviet communist. He joined the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1904. During the Revolution of 1905 he was arrested; after his release he joined the Bolsheviks and was arrested several more times for revolutionary activity. He occupied high positions in the hierarchy of the Communist Party.

He was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, as well as of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee. He was a loyal supporter of Stalin. In 1934 Kirov's popularity had increased and Stalin showed signs of mistrust. In December of that year Kirov was assassinated by a younger party member. It is believed that Stalin ordered the murder, but it has never been proven.

7. 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.

8. Yezhov, Nikolai Ivanovich (1895-1939): Political activist, State Security General Commissar (1937), Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR from 1936-38. Arrested and shot in 1939. One of the leaders of mass arrests during Stalin's Great Purge between 1936-1939.

9. Blockade of Leningrad: On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

10. War with Japan: In 1945 the war in Europe was over, but in the Far East Japan was still fighting against the anti-fascist coalition countries and China. The USSR declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and Japan signed the act of capitulation in September 1945.

11. Buchenwald: Nazi concentration camp operating from March 1937 until April 1945 in Germany, near Weimar. It was divided into 136 wards; inmates were forced to labor in the armaments industry, quarries; approx. 56,000 thousand of the 238,000 inmates, representing many nationalities, died. An uprising of the prisoners broke out shortly before liberation, on 11 April 1945

12. Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971): Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

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

14. 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.

15. 1956: It designates the Revolution, which started on 23rd October 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest started in which Stalin's gigantic statue was destroyed. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization.

The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationing in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's announcement that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the rising on 4th November and mass repression and arrests started. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy, and a number of his supporters were executed.

Until 1989, the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

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

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

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

19. Gorbachev, Mikhail (1931-): Soviet political leader. Gorbachev joined the Communist Party in 1952 and gradually moved up in the party hierarchy. In 1970 he was elected to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, where he remained until 1990. In 1980 he joined the politburo, and in 1985 he was appointed general secretary of the party.

In 1986 he embarked on a comprehensive program of political, economic, and social liberalization under the slogans of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring). The government released political prisoners, allowed increased emigration, attacked corruption, and encouraged the critical reexamination of Soviet history.

The Congress of People's Deputies, founded in 1989, voted to end the Communist Party's control over the government and elected Gorbachev executive president. Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party and granted the Baltic states independence. Following the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991, he resigned as president. Since 1992, Gorbachev has headed international organizations.

20. Hesed: Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society.

The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs).

The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.