

# Elena Drapkina

Elena Drapkina

St. Petersburg

Russia

Interviewer: Vera Postavinskaya

Date of interview: February 2006

*Elena Askaryevna Drapkina is very pretty and charming woman. Aged 82, she looks like a 65-year-old woman. Her eyes are bright black; her voice is young and ringing.*

*She is very active. She is a person of humor and inspires her interlocutor with energy and optimism.*

*Is also very sociable, during the interview in her apartment telephone rings every minute: her acquaintances, friends, relatives, and neighbors call her having different requests.*

*Elena Askaryevna lives alone in a cozy two-room apartment in a new district of St. Petersburg. Scrupulous neatness is around her. We can see photos of her relatives on the walls.*

*She does her apartment herself, nobody helps her. Every Saturday she goes to the synagogue, and the way there is not easy even for a young person: it usually takes 1 hour and a half.*

*But it does not embarrass Elena Askaryevna. She goes shopping almost every day. She also often takes part in different cultural events arranged by the Hesed Avraham Welfare Center [1](#). Her memory keeps a lot of details of her colorful biography.*

To read interview in Russian go to: <https://pamjat.centropa.org/ru/biografiya/yelena-drapkina/>

- [My family background](#)
- [Growing up](#)
- [During the War](#)
- [Life in the Ghetto](#)
- [Escaping the Ghetto](#)
- [Partisan life](#)
- [After the War](#)
- [Glossary](#)

- **My family background**

I was born in 1924 in Minsk in the family of Levins (Osher Girshevich and Ginde Elyevna). [Minsk is the capital of Belarus.]



I know nothing about my great-grandmothers and great-grandfathers. My paternal grandmother and grandfather died before my birth, and all my maternal relatives were born and lived in Minsk.

My maternal grandmother died in 1934, her name was Dina-Rayzle Hautovskaya. She was a housewife, she had got 10 children: 7 daughters and 3 sons. I remember my grandmother very well: she often went for a walk with me, we talked much. I remember that one day I asked her 'Granny, does God exist?' Grandmother answered that she did not know, and asked me not to ask my grandfather about it. Grandmother did not wear either a wig or a scarf, but at home she observed kashrut and celebrated holidays.

My grandfather (my mother's father) was called Elya Hautovsky, but all of us called him grandfather. He was born in 1870, and died in Minsk ghetto in 1941. He was a real devotee: he never ate out, because they observed kashrut nowhere around. By the way, my parents did not observe kashrut. The only relative of ours, my aunt Sonya did it when she lived together with grandfather and grandmother. After grandmother's death she lived with grandfather and cooked kosher meals for him. Later she got married, but still observed kashrut.

Grandfather worked at a small shop, he was its owner. Financial position of the family was not very good. All children wanted to study, but it was impossible: at that time (in tsarist days) there existed five percent quota for Jews [2](#). The elder children (my Mum, aunt Manya and aunt Sonya) finished high school in Minsk.

Two daughters of them (Maryasye and Malke), my aunts left for Moscow to study, later they got married there and had children. They both married Russians. Aunt Maryasye was a teacher of geography. Aunt Malke worked as an economist at a textile factory all her life long. There she was a local Communist Party leader [a head of the primary organization of employees-communists of the organization]. Her husband's surname was Sidorov. Before the war burst out, grandmother visited her daughters in Moscow. She reported that Malke had got a very good husband, although he was gentile. Both aunts survived the war in Moscow and reached a great age.

Grandfather observed Tradition, visited synagogue. He always wore a hat. I remember that when he prayed, he put tefillin on his forehead and hand. He also had tallit.

Their 6th daughter, aunt Polya got married and left for Kiev. There she continued studying at a pharmaceutical school and became a pharmacist. In Minsk aunt Sonya decided to attend lectures at the pharmaceutical school instead of her absent sister, but they said 'Hautovskaya, you steal our lessons.' I heard that story later from relatives.

The rest children lived in Minsk. My mother's brother, uncle David had a family, and uncles Misha and Shayle were not married. Aunt Polya lived in Kiev, she got a specialty of pharmacist, but did not work: she was a housewife (she had got 2 children). Her husband was the chief inspector of Belarus. His name was Lazar Hautin. A Jew was the chief inspector of Belarus! During the war aunt Polya, her husband and her children Berte and Sara were evacuated to Kazakhstan. There Lazar was considered by authorities to be a great expert, therefore they did not call him up. After the end of the war I returned to Minsk (I worked there in the Executive Committee of the City Soviet of People's Deputies) and sent them an invitation to Kazakhstan. [Official invitation for residence in Minsk after the lift of occupation in Minsk in July 1944, the city authorities established for the evacuated citizens as temporary restrictions. These restrictions were caused by considerable

destruction of available housing and municipal services and acute shortage of housing. For entry to Minsk, it was necessary to have an official invitation of a ministry, plant, establishment, or a member of the family residing in the city.] Therefore they managed to return to Minsk in 1945.

Grandfather and grandmother spoke Yiddish to each other, but they also could speak Russian. I misremember their house, because we lived separately. We had a lot of cousins and we were good friends. Grandfather loved all of us very much, and we adored him. He often played games with us.

Before the war Minsk was a fine small town, there were about 300,000 inhabitants, if I am not mistaken. I guess a good half of them were Jews.

My Daddy, Levin Osher Girshevich was born in Minsk in 1891. His coworkers called him Oscar Grigoryevich. Daddy worked as a teacher of Jewish and Russian languages and later (when I was a pupil of the 8th or 9th form) he started working as a bookkeeper. His health was always weak: he was visually impaired and always wore glasses. Daddy was lost in Minsk ghetto in 1941.

My Mum was born in Minsk in 1895 and was lost in Minsk ghetto on November 20, 1941. Her maiden name was Hautovskaya. Her Jewish name was Ginde Elyevna, but everybody called her Eugenia Ilyinichna. Mum finished a high school in Minsk, she worked in Minsk Executive Committee of the City Soviet of People's Deputies. Probably Daddy could not support our family alone, therefore Mum had to work.

Daddy took in the Worker newspaper, Murzilka children's magazine for me, Pionerskaya Pravda newspaper, Moscow Pravda, and a local Belarus newspaper.

Mum and Daddy spoke Yiddish to each other, and we (children) understood them, but they did not teach us to write and read Yiddish. When I was 8, in Belarus there still were several Jewish schools, but a little bit later authorities closed them down.

I know nothing about the way my parents got acquainted, about their wedding, but I guess that everything was arranged according to Tradition, because my grandfather was strict religious observer.

In our family there were 3 children: elder brother Hirsh was named in honor of my paternal grandfather. Hirsh was born in 1920. The next child was me, Elena (born in 1924). And my younger brother Saul was born in 1929. Saul was lost on November 20, 1941 in Minsk ghetto together with Mum.

Daddy had a lot of books: I remember books by Chernyshevsky [3](#) and Gertzen [4](#). Mum read less, because she had to work: there were no assistants, she had to do the house, cook meals. She used to come home late in the evening, but Daddy helped her much. I remember the following: one day Mum came home and lay down to have a rest, and Daddy came up to her and kissed her in our presence (I guess that action was some sort of educative value: he wanted to show the children an example of proper relations between family members). Daddy read much, knew much, and played first fiddle in our family. We did not go to the regional library: every school had its own school library, where we borrowed books for reading.

- **Growing up**

Our family did not observe Jewish traditions, but for Pesach grandfather used to come to us, bring matzah and some very tasty wine, which he asked all of us to taste.

One day, I remember, when we were in ghetto, grandfather came in (probably it was Yom Kippur) and said 'Ginde, today don't give children meal at least until 12 o'clock.' At that time we had only goats and water to eat. Mum objected, saying that we were already starving. Nevertheless grandfather asked her to put off till 12 o'clock. I heard their conversation, but at that time I did not understand the meaning. Now I understand that it was Yom Kippur, when people had to keep a fast and eating was forbidden.

My parents were not Party members. I know nothing about their political views, because that topic was taboo for us.

Daddy probably had a white chit [a person exempted from compulsory military service because of poor health]. He was visually impaired since childhood and wore glasses all the time.

At that time I knew nothing about Minsk Jewish community. Grandfather visited synagogue and there he probably communicated with the community members. My parents did not go to the synagogue: they had to work much, they had no time for talking, it was necessary to take care of 3 children. I remember that once our parents went to the theater, and we together with my brother remained at home. There were no locks at that time, I barred the door and we fell asleep. We did not hear our parents returned from the theatre, did not hear them knocking at the door. Daddy had to bring a ladder, climb upstairs, and get in through the small opening window pane of the room on the 2nd floor.

When I became older, we often went to the Minsk Jewish theatre. I remember Tevye Milkman performance. The theater was closed before the war burst out. We also went on a visit to Russian families.

I do not remember my parents leaving for somewhere to have a rest. As for me, I spent summer holidays in pioneer camps, and my younger brother went to dacha [5](#) with children from his kindergarten. Mum worked all days long, therefore it was me who often visited my brother in his kindergarten.

Daddy had 2 brothers. The younger one was called uncle Tolya, and I do not remember the name of the elder brother. The elder one was a pharmacist and worked in a drugstore. The younger brother had a wife and a son Misha Levin (I do not remember what he did for living). Uncle Tolya's wife was aunt Rachel (she finished the high school together with my Mum). All of them lived in Minsk. During the war, in ghetto all 3 brothers and their families lived in one 14-square-meter room.

I attended kindergarten, later I became a pupil of the school no.34. After a while we were moved to the Stalin school no.21. My elder brother Hirsh studied at school and had a hobby: he liked to dance and was rarely at home. We together with my younger brother Saul stayed at home. I remember us building a steam locomotive of chairs. As our parents were busy with their work, I spent all the time with my younger brother.

At school we had very good teachers. They taught us in some sort of a mixed language: one word in Russian, another word in Belarussian. Teacher of geography was Uzbek, and Russian language was taught by a Georgian woman. History was taught by a married couple of Rubinchiks: sometimes he taught, sometimes she did. Their lectures were very interesting.

Yakov Meltserzon was our from-master and taught us physics very well. All pupils knew physics perfectly: it was impossible not to know it. If it was necessary, Meltserzon gave supportive lessons to pupils who were below their schoolfellows in class. When after the end of the war I arrived in Leningrad, I had to pass only 2 examinations to enter a stomatological school (I was hors concours as a war participant): Russian language and physics. In spite of 4 years of war, I went through the exams successfully (having only 1 month for preparation). I think it happened due to Meltserzon's contribution.

Recently I read biography of the latter Nobel prize winner (Vitaly Ginzburg, a physicist), where he wrote that before the war he was a pupil of a Minsk school, and it was Meltserzon who planted his love for physics. So I was very proud of the fact that I and the Nobel winner were taught physics by the same teacher.

My brothers and I studied at school. Before the war I finished the 9th form. I remember that when I was a pupil of the 3rd form, I concerned myself with children's technical station, where we tried to cultivate cotton. My cotton grew high, but did not ripen: there was not enough solar heat for it. My cotton was shown at the exhibition in the House of Government.

We lived near the river, and I managed to swim well at the age of 12. All children had to meet requirements of special classification standard for young sportsmen [it was called Be Ready to Work and Hold the Line]. A coach saw me at the competition and invited me to his sports group. I agreed. At that time in Minsk there was the only swimming pool in the House of Red Army, I started training sessions in swimming (brace style) at the city sports society. I held several records of Belarus in that category of swimming; I also took the 6th place at the all-Union competition for girls of my age (aged 12-14). I participated in all-Union competitions of five cities in Kiev and in all-Union competitions in Tbilisi. Children were brought there from all republics. It happened in 1939. At the same time I studied in theatrical studio at the Palace of Pioneers. There I got acquainted with Masha Bruskina.

So that was my childhood and it was not a time of stress. Before the war my elder brother studied at school, and after the war burst out he left for the army. This is all I know about him till now. After the end of the war I wrote to the all-Union Search Department, and they answered that he was not registered among persons who were killed in battle, died of wounds or were missing.

Members of our family did not observe Tradition; life of Soviet style surrounded us. I remember the process of construction of the Opera and Ballet Theater. Its building stood in its integrity after the end of the war. Our apartment was situated in the house between the River Svisloch and the Opera and Ballet Theater. It was the former Belotserkovnaya Street (in Soviet time it was called Krasnoznamenaya Street).

We lived in the two-storied building, on the 2nd floor: we used an iron ladder to get there. The 1st story was made of bricks, and the 2nd one was wooden. There was no water supply, no toilet, and electricity supply was only in one room. For those days it was a good communal apartment [6](#).

There were 3 rooms, one of them was occupied by a family (a husband, a wife and a child), and our family lived in 2 large adjacent rooms (a large dining room with 4 windows and a large bedroom).

I remember workers stretching radio network. We used stove for heating, the kitchen was common. In the kitchen there was a Russian stove, and in our rooms there was a tiled stove. The apartment was situated in the corner of the house and was rather cool. In the bedroom there were 4 beds and a wardrobe, in the dining room - a big buffet (as long as the wall) and a sofa. Later we bought nickel-plated beds instead of wooden ones.

In our house there lived both Russian and Jewish families. Russian families observed orthodox Easter. I do not remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism: at that time it was prosecuted. I remember that a boy called somebody a dirty Jew, but it was stopped and caused fair hearing in presence of his parents. I remember that it was not accented. And in 1937 we felt the changes, when they started arresting teachers, including Jews.

I remember my school teacher of history Timofey Timofeevich. We loved him very much, and at school they told us that he was an enemy of the people [7](#), a spy. It was very special time. After his arrest Riva Abramovna began to teach us history (she was a director and also a good historian).

I grew up in pioneer camps, because my parents could not rent dacha for a summer. I went to different pioneer camps, which belonged to my mother's organization or my father's, etc. During summer time I used to have rest in 3 camps (one after another). In camps food was abysmal. I remember that in 1934 (I was 10 years old) Daddy came to visit me there and brought two loaves of bread, and it was a festival for us! There were very long intervals between meals. Children lacked food, but we were cheerful. Our pioneer leaders stuffed our heads with patriotic propagandistic ideas.

Not far from our house there was a horse market, there were many different markets around. Most often Mum went to the market to buy food, she took my brother and me with her. I remember the so-called Tatar Vegetable Gardens, once we brought a bag of potatoes from it using sledge. It was in 1934 or 1936.

I remember that in 1937 there appeared newspaper articles about traitors to our country: Rykov, Zinovyev. I also remember parades that took place in front of the House of Government.

We were very modest in dress. Sometimes children wore clothes with room for growth. Parents paid main attention to feeding and educating of children.

At school there were pupils of different nationalities: Jews, Russians, and Ukrainians. When we were placed in ghetto, but before it was surrounded by a barbed wire, my friends came to visit me: Varya Solonenko, Zina Ivanova, Valya Andreeva.

One day after Varya visited me in ghetto, I went to see her to the ghetto gates. We saw inscriptions on the gate-posts around the territory of ghetto: GENTILES ARE NOT ADMITTED (the same was written in German). Varya and I stood on different sides of the ghetto limit, and at that moment a German officer appeared nearby. He had seen Varya (she was blond) leaving ghetto territory. He approached her and said 'Are you crazy? Where do you go?' The officer took her to the gate-post and ordered 'Read the inscription! Did you understand it?' Then he shouted loudly 'Nach Hause!'



When I came home and told Mum about the incident, she decided to forbid girls their visits: if something happened, their parents could be displeased.

I had good friends: Masha Bruskina and Masha Plotkina (her family did not manage to evacuate). In ghetto I met Vinitzky (I guess he was killed later) and Fima Messel. Messel was his father's family name, but during the war he changed his surname to that of his mother: it was more like German, than his father's. Later he became a dissident.

### • **During the War**

In 1941 I finished 9 classes. The war burst out in June [8](#). On the 2nd day of war on June 24 Germans severely bombed Minsk, and troops entered the city. Our neighbor Shura Bogdanovich (he had a Jewish wife and 2 little children) came by a large car, took his family, his wife's parents, our family and 2 families more.

Minsk was burning, it was full of smoke, and Shura took us away from Minsk (later it turned out that we moved towards German troops). We ran away from fire, not from Germans. We arrived in a small town near Minsk; there we spent 10 days. Soon that town turned out into a battlefield, and we went back to Minsk on foot.

When we returned to Minsk, we found out that our house had been bombed-out. Next to our house there was a military hospital. They spread out a special cloth with a red cross: they expected Germans to be civilized people and not to bomb a hospital. But they used that cross as a target and destroyed the hospital by bombing.

We went to grandfather. Grandfather, aunt Sonya and two little children could not leave Minsk during the fire, but they survived the bombardment: all houses around were burned down except theirs. When I asked aunt Sonya how they managed to survive, she answered 'Lena, you know that I believe in God; I was sure that God would help us.'

They curtained windows with wet bed sheets and saved their lives. Moissey, aunt Sonya's husband was at the Leningrad front, they corresponded with each other, but at the end of the war aunt Sonya stopped receiving letters from him: probably he was killed in battle.

### • **Life in the Ghetto**

Grandfather lodged us in the apartment of uncle David, which also escaped bombardment (uncle David left the keys for grandfather when his family was going to be evacuated). The ghetto limit went along the street, where uncle David's apartment was situated. Unfortunately our side of the street was ascribed to Russian area, and the opposite one was included in ghetto territory.

When Germans entered the city, they posted up notices that all Jews should gather in one district (they named the exact district). Those Jews who lived in the named district had to remain in their houses, and Russians had to leave: people started exchanging apartments. Our house was on the Russian side of the street. We had no time to change our apartment, but on the ghetto territory there lived father's younger brother (uncle Tolya), he had a small room of 14 square meters and a tiny kitchen of 5 square meters on the ground floor (they lived there together: uncle Tolya, aunt Rachel, and their son Misha). Family of the father's elder brother also got into difficulties. As a

result, 3 brothers with their families gathered in that tiny room. We were many: Daddy, Mum, my younger brother Saul and I, family of uncle Tolya (3 persons), and the elder brother of Daddy with his daughter (his wife died before the war) - 9 persons in total.

Jews who failed to appear in ghetto had to be executed. So we lodged in that small room. It was possible for Jews to live only on the ghetto territory. But while it was not enclosed with barbed wire yet, we managed to get out for a certain time to find food, though it was forbidden. When the territory got enclosed, they organized there labor exchange and people went there. Daddy and I also went there.

Daddy died very soon. The first manhunt was organized on August 14, 1941. The second one happened on August 28.

Germans and volunteers from among local citizens (called polizei) inspected houses. Their aim was to find men. On August 28 Daddy went out of doors, they took him away and he disappeared. Daddy's elder brother escaped somehow. He went to the assembly point, because they promised to give job. But in fact they gathered men to send them to concentration camp. Uncle Tolya stayed there a couple of months and then managed to escape. But on November 20 he died together with my Mum. In the morning of that day I was still in bed. My place for sleeping was on the table because the room was overcrowded. Father's elder brother was a real devotee and as I understand now, Jews organized a meeting-house in ghetto. In the morning he wanted to go there, but polizei did not let him out. Among the polizei there were Russians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians. He came back and informed us about policemen. We understood everything, because grandfather and my aunt disappeared during the similar manhunt on November 7. Immediately I jumped up, put something on and rushed under the staircase. Our men constructed there some sort of a shelter trench: the narrow space was covered with plate from one side and curtained with cloths. I managed to jump inside there. The space was already full of people, after me uncle Tolya's son Misha jumped in. There we stood all day long. Among us there was a woman with a little child, and we all were afraid that the child would cry. Germans entered the houses, combed rooms and took everybody out. We heard everything around us: people going upstairs and downstairs and my Mum saying 'Wait a moment; I'll put on my coat.'

All my relatives were taken away from Minsk and executed by shooting. Now I cannot understand the way I managed to endure the torture that lasted the whole day. Thanks to Daddy's elder brother who warned about the manhunt, I had enough time to hide and escape.

Standing there in that narrow place, I heard my uncle Tolya taking the ladder to leave house through the second floor. Unfortunately he fell down, broke his leg and crawled back into the house. Germans came in to comb the house once more, found him and shot right in the room. A day later we went out of our shelter together with Misha and saw his father dead.

It was impossible to stay in our house any more. Through the window I saw Rachel (a girl whom we studied together in the theatrical studio at the Palace of Pioneers). She lived in the same house with my grandfather. I called her, and she gave me a silent signal to come to her place.

She lived there together with 2 other children, their father and his brother's family. Her father was a very good shoemaker, he worked for the general-commissioner of the city, therefore Germans kept him from scathe. Together with Misha we went there. We all stayed in one room. There was no



place to sleep, but we found a place under the table and considered it to be very good, because when people got up at night they were not able to step on us.

Later Germans brought Jews from Hamburg (Germany) and lodged them in the houses of killed Jews. Later they told us that Germans deceived them: told that they would bring them to Palestine, but brought to Minsk. They were horrified, when got to know about it.

A day later I went to the labor exchange. They gave me job in the main warehouse of the railway. The warehouse was very large and they brought there soap, a soap powder, brooms and other goods from Germany. We were 19 girls, we had to load and unload freight cars. Germans brought us there and back by a lorry as the warehouse was far from ghetto. So I remained working there from the end of autumn (all winter long). Many Jews worked, but not all of them. There were many women with little children, a lot of old men.

Germans repeated pogroms. There was no food, people tried to change things for food. At the warehouse Germans gave us their uneaten food, but it was their good will. Most of railroad men were old persons. The chief German was about 40 years old. Sometimes they gave us fire wood, gasoline, kerosene, soap, soap powder. In the ghetto there was a market, so I sold there 2 bars of soap (for example) and bought something eatable.

I lived in the room with my cousin Misha and with some elderly person and his son. Later Misha found his aunt Rachel (his mother's sister), but she died soon, therefore Misha was taken by Rachel's unmarried sisters.

On March 3, 1942 there happened a terrible pogrom, at the warehouse we were told that ghetto was in fire. We asked assistant of the chief, the old man not to carry us in ghetto after work, but he said it was impossible. When we arrived, they made us stand in line at the ghetto entrance. We were surrounded by armed guard, it was impossible to escape.

There were several cordons, and near each one a German checked documents. I had a worker's pass. Germans sorted people to groups. It lasted very long, night closed in, it was cold, and full moon gave bright light.

It was already about 3 o'clock in the morning. In the first group they gathered Hamburg Jews (they were holding hands). I approached them and went through, having lifted their hands. I was moving towards ghetto. Poles stood next, and again I went through. I came up a German who checked documents, and he struck me on the head by a whip, but he let me into the ghetto, and I joined a group of our men whom we worked together. A person among them asked me about his daughter, but I knew nothing. At last Germans ordered 'Go home!' And the next day all our men arrived at the warehouse, but only 2 girls including me.

After that I realized that it was necessary to escape. But how? Earlier we talked about it with Masha Bruskina and assumed that somewhere there was an anti-fascist underground. But on October 26 Masha was hung up by Germans.

I'd like to tell you a little about my friend Masha Bruskina. We made friends with her before the war when we studied in the theatrical studio. During German occupation Masha got fixed up in a job at a hospital situated out of ghetto limits. They did not want Jews to work there. So Masha blonded her hair and managed to get that job. When wounded men recovered, they usually were sent to

Germany for forced labor. To avoid it, Masha got somewhere civil clothes for them and helped them to find partisans. But it could not go on without end: someone informed Germans against Masha.

Germans arranged a demonstrative execution and hung Masha in one of the Minsk squares. Her body was left on the gibbet for a long time. Having learnt about it, Masha's mother (she was in ghetto together with us) went crazy. After the end of the war I came to Minsk and visited the local museum. There I saw a photo of partisans on the gibbet and recognized Masha Bruskina among them.

There was an inscription 'Unknown Partisans.' I immediately recognized Masha and addressed administration of the museum. But they talked to me very scornfully; they said that for some reason several people of a certain appearance wanted to discuss that photograph. They hinted at my nationality. It took me a lot of time to rehabilitate Masha Bruskina: she died saving lives. It is very hard to recollect it now.

Electricians Chekhovsky and Victor (Russians) worked together with me in the warehouse. They hated Germans. One day Chekhovsky came up to me and said 'Lena, we'll give you Russian passport; I hope you won't betray us.' I promised. I gave them my photo, and they made a seal on it in the passport by hand. That passport read that I was Skrotskaya Yadviga, a Pole born in 1920. So I got my passport in April, and waited for a moment to leave ghetto. Terrible pogrom happened on July 28, 1942. It lasted several days. After that pogrom I managed to leave Minsk. Later I met Victor in a partisan group: it turned out that he and Chekhovsky were partisan messengers.

A Russian girl Lena worked together with me. I asked her to help me get out of Minsk. Another girl Oktya already left Minsk for Western Belarus. But in Minsk she left her mother and sister. So she worked for a short time in the Western Belarus and decided to return and save her mother and sister. But by that time her mother was already dead.

Oktya told us that in the Western Belarus, on the territory of former Poland it was possible to find job easily: they required women for field work. Lena's sister lived there, therefore I asked her to take me out of Minsk limits. She agreed.

### • **Escaping the Ghetto**

At 6 o'clock in the morning I left ghetto in the column of workers. Near the ghetto limits Lena was waiting for me. The column was escorted by one German soldier; I managed to leave the column imperceptibly and met Lena. Then I took off my jacket with yellow tabs and we went to Lena's home. There she locked me and left for her work. In the evening she returned, we spent there a night, and early in the morning of the next day we started our walk to Lena's sister. We walked from 6 o'clock in the morning till late at night (about 50 kilometers). It was in July.

Now I cannot understand the way I stood that test. At the exit of the city they checked our documents: passport of Skrotskaya and a reference (it was made for me by a German Jewess, who worked for our heads). Late at night we came to Lena's sister, they gave us food and a place for overnight. Lena slept in the house, and I was sent to a hayloft. In the morning we had breakfast, and then Lena's sister harnessed a horse. We drove out, and there she showed me the road and the wood I had to go through to get to the Western Belarus. Lena's sister left and I remained alone

on the road in the unknown place.

All my belongings I carried with me. I went forward. I never saw raspberry in the forest, so I was walking along the road and eating berries. At last a farm appeared. I saw 3 men there and asked in Belarussian whether they needed a girl to work at their farm. An elderly man refused, having explained that they did everything themselves. He advised me to go farther to Poland and showed the road. He said that the brook over there was the former border of Poland (up to 1939) [9](#). If I crossed it, I would find myself in the Western Belarus, where it was easier to find job.

I thanked, but asked the old man to show me the way. He agreed and for some time we were moving together. He suddenly asked me if I were Jewish. I confirmed. Then he warned me 'In no circumstances tell anybody that you are a Jewess. Show your passport and keep silence.' And I went on alone.

By the way, later I met all those people who helped me. And regarding that old man: I met him by chance, when I got to his farm, being a member of partisan group. He told me that those two men I saw at him that day were later killed by Germans.

I reached another farm, where there lived a woman, her daughter and her son. They asked me where I was from. They spoke Russian, and I only spoke Belarussian language. I told them that I was from Minsk. They asked me to show my documents. From my documents they understood that I worked in the main railway warehouse. It turned out that the woman's son also worked there. He asked whom I knew there. I named several persons. So I got through that checking procedure successfully.

The woman asked me to work in their field next day (to crop oats) and promised to show me the way to the Western Belarus later. I spent the night in the house; they said that at night time partisans could come. The next day they gave me a sickle, and I worked in the field.

Later I gave the woman some soap powder and I went on. She went with me for a while, because I was afraid of woods. Soon we saw 2 men cutting grass in the clearing. The woman knew these men (a father and a son) and offered me as a worker for them. The man's name was Paul Bulakh. He asked me to show my documents and later his wife agreed to take me. They had 3 children: Volodya, Sergey and Nina. In my passport there was a note that I was married. I told Paul's wife that I was able to do everything.

Then she decided to begin with milking their cow. I said that it would be very hard for me, because I had been living in the city for a long time. In short they had to milk the cow themselves after my milking. I lived with them for a month and one day Paul and his wife left for the near village to attend a funeral, and I stayed at home with their children. Suddenly Nina ran in and shouted 'Partisans are coming!' I ran inside and hid myself behind the wardrobe. I heard partisans asking children about their parents. Nina told them that parents had left for the funeral and added 'And there is a girl here!'

At that moment I understood that there was no more sense to be hidden and appeared from behind the wardrobe. They were 5. Again they asked my documents. The commander looked my registration note. There was written that I was registered in Komintern settlement near Minsk (it was rather far from my house in reality).

The commander said that he had been my neighbor, he began asking questions and I did not know the answers. I admitted to be a Jewess who escaped from the ghetto. I asked them to take me with them: as they unmasked me, it would be difficult for me to speak to the farm owner. Among the partisans there was one Jewish man [Here Elena Askaryevna called him in Yiddish ayid]. The commander told the children to say their father the following: the girl would live on the farm until partisans come to take her away.

He said to me that they were going to fulfill a combat mission, and on their way back they would come to take me. Here he added that if they did not find me, they would burn the farm down. And they left.

When the farm owners returned home, their daughter told them everything. And her father answered that he already suspected me. I heard their conversation. Then he asked me to tell everything about myself in details and especially to tell my real name. His wife pointed to her suspicions too, because I not always responded to my name.

I told them everything, and the farm owner was surprised by my straight hair and absence of burr. I lived with them for another month. Nobody came.

#### • **Partisan life**

Suddenly a Moscow landing group appeared there in the wood (near the farm). They were 8. They came to the farm, and I told them I wanted to become a partisan, I wanted to take revenge for my lost relatives, because I remained alone. They promised to take me. So I became a member of the Moscow landing group in September or October 1942.

Since that time till July 1944 I was one of the partisans. The group grew into a brigade, later the brigade developed into a formation. All the time we acted in the same region. Our base was in Stayki village.

In 1943 in a battle I was wounded in my back (a splinter went into my back). Our formation was supervised from the center of partisan movement in Moscow. Later Franz Dvorack, a Czech became our commander. Having been wounded, I got into the partisan hospital.

Partisans lived in earth-houses both in the winter and in the summer. They never got undressed. The hospital was situated in earth-houses, too. There worked a very good doctor Svistunenka. He made blood transfusion and then sent me to the farm owners. They helped me to recover: their family was loyal to partisans and supported them.

I became a commandant of the village most remote from the German garrison. There were 7 commandants on the territory. From time to time Germans appeared in our villages. Once during a meeting of 3 commandants of the near villages Germans came unexpectedly and shot them. But Germans did not dare to approach Morozovka (my village), because on the way there were a lot of other villages controlled by partisans. In 1944 during running fights Germans blocked us.

They set fire to surrounding woods, and we did not know where to go. We ran around the wood. I was together with 2 girls from our brigade. We had crackers with us, but no water. I carried a sawn-off gun. Girls were afraid of my gun, because without weapon we could be taken for local residents,

otherwise we could be only partisans. Therefore we buried my gun.

So I was a member of the partisan group from 1942 till July 3, 1944. Later we joined active forces of the Red Army. After that we got an order to clean the woods. Germans broke up into small units and hid in the woods (especially volunteers from among local residents). They lived in our earth-houses, and we tried to find them. It lasted about a week.

That was why I did not manage to be on the Victory parade in Minsk. I got to Minsk later. Immediately several girls and I got fixed to job: we were secretaries (gave out meal tickets, documents, and characteristics). Franz Dvorack, my commander told me that as I was with partisans from the very beginning, I had to describe everything in full details (in fact he could not write in Russian). I did it, and only then he gave me my documents.

In 1944 vice-president of the Minsk executive committee came to us and asked about 2 competent girls for work in his reception. He did not want to take someone who was on the occupied territory. I and my friend Alla were taken there.

Together with Alla we lived in a hotel. Several months later we started asking for another habitation. And we got one small room and a kitchen on the ground floor. Alla was from Kinghisepp [a city in Leningrad region], before the war she worked in Minsk. During the war she worked there for Germans in a passport office. She gave out passports for partisans, but Germans got to know about it. Fortunately Alla was alarmed in time, therefore she had time to leave and survived.

#### • After the War

The apartment of my uncle David survived the war, but there lived chief of local KGB [10](#). They did not let me in. In the apartment of my grandfather I found letters from aunt Polya and uncle David. From the letters I learned that aunt Polya, wife of uncle David was evacuated to Bashkiria. I also understood that they wanted to come back home.

I made invitations for them. I thought that when my relatives arrived, we would live in my room all together. But suddenly there appeared a Jewish woman with 2 little children - she was the mistress of our apartment. Public prosecutor of Minsk decided to return the room to that woman.

Alla and I had to move away. But that woman appeared to be very kind, she understood the situation, and let us stay in her room. So we were 5 in that small room: the woman, 2 children of her, Alla and me. I was horrified: where should I lodge my aunt and her children?

So we (Alla and I) decided to live in the executive committee building for some time.

My aunt and her children arrived in December 1944 or in January 1945. I told my aunt everything, and we managed to lodge her and her children in her former apartment together with new tenants.

In Minsk restful life was shaking down rapidly, I had good work. But walking along the streets of the city where my parents, my brother (all my relatives) had been shot, was very hard for me. My mother's sister (even more than sister: my mum's twin) aunt Manya and her family lived in Leningrad and survived the blockade. So I arrived in Leningrad and entered a stomatological school. It happened in 1945. And in 1946 I got married.

My husband Drapkin Wolf Yakovlevich was born in 1921 in Gorodok (now Belarus). At the age of 2 months his parents brought him to Leningrad, there he finished school. His mother was a housewife and did not work; his father was director of a big shop in Ligovsky prospect. During the siege he stayed in Leningrad, and his family lived in evacuation.

My husband had a brother and 2 sisters. Before the war he finished military school of communications, got appointment to the Far East and was moving by train to the destination point when the war burst out. During the war he served in Iran, in Central Asia. There he got ill with enteric fever and malaria and undermined his health.

In 1945 he arrived in Leningrad and entered the Military Academy of Radio Electronics named after Budyonny. In 1946 we got acquainted in the house of my aunt, where my future husband came on business. We both finished the first courses and got married in summer.

It happened on August 9, 1946. My mother-in-law was a devotee and said that she would consider valid only chuppah wedding. You know, at that time making chuppah was equivalent to committing a suicide, because my husband was a Party member. We were scared, but nevertheless he took the risk. I did not object, because my mother-in-law wanted us to do it. It was the day off, relatives went somewhere to Sestroretsk or Zelenogorsk and brought rabbi. They opened the small synagogue, and we had there our chuppah wedding. So our wedding was arranged according to both Jewish Tradition and Soviet rules (of course we registered our marriage at the civilian registry office).

On May 9 (the Victory Day), 1947 I gave birth to my son. My son Alexander Drapkin was born strong and good. By the way, we arranged bar mitzvah for my son at the urgent request of my mother-in-law.

On June 27, 1949 my husband died suddenly. It happened in a tram. He told passengers that he felt bad and that was all.

We lived together with his parents 3 years more. His parents lost 2 sons (Boris was killed during the war, and my husband died after it).

In 1948 I finished my studies.

For 11 months I stayed at home with my child, and then went to work in a children's polyclinic. During my life they moved me from one polyclinic to another, but I never left my service and worked 35 years until I was 60 years old (in 1985), when I retired.

I remember central newspaper articles concerning Doctors' Plot [11](#). It happened in 1952. Those articles created a great impression on me: I was brought up by the Soviet propagation and considered everything published in the central press to be true. In my polyclinic I shared my ideas with its manager (she was Jewish too) Anshelis. That wise woman looked at me attentively and said 'Elena Askaryevna, do not trust these newspapers, you will see them rehabilitated one day [12](#).'

At the age of 25 I became a widow. I lived with my son and did not want to marry for the second time.



In 1959 I got acquainted with Leyb Berovich Sverdlin. By that time his wife had died, and he remained with 2 sons: Vadim (born in 1934) and Sasha (born in 1944). He was a builder by profession. His father was a rabbi in Polotsk (Belarus), where my husband was born. We got acquainted in the apartment of my friend Ety Gordman. She lived in one communal apartment with his sister. We got married in January 1960. There was no wedding ceremony.

We were 5: I, my husband and 3 sons. By that time Vadim was already married. He moved to my room, and I together with my son moved to my husband's, but Vadim used to spend a lot of time at ours. The younger son of my husband Alexander and my son (Alexander also) made friends at once and spent all holidays together. They are good friends till now.

My husband's elder son Vadim graduated from the Leningrad Railway College (building faculty) and worked as a builder. Unfortunately he died 7 or 8 years ago.

My husband's younger son Alexander also graduated from the Leningrad Railway College (mechanical faculty) and many years worked as an engineer at Kirov factory.

My son Alexander studied in the Higher Military School of Communications named after Popov and later he changed that School for the College of Communication named after Bonch-Bruevich and graduated from it. At present he is a businessman.

Now our sons have families, children, and I have got grandchildren. The elder son Alexander has Jewish family. My grandson was born in 1975.

My son has got a daughter. She was also born in 1975. Now she lives in the USA with her mother and grandfather, she is single. They have been living in the USA (in California) for 20 years. I see my granddaughter very seldom when she comes to Russia. My son was married for the second time; he brings up the son of his second wife.

I lived with my second husband for 28 years. At the age of 70 he still worked... He died in 1988 from an insult.

When I retired, we moved to another district (to this apartment where I live now). But being a pensioner, I continued working in children's stomatological polyclinic and implementing stomatological checkups at schools and kindergartens.

During our life with my second husband we always celebrated Pesach and remembered Yom Kippur. At home we had matzah, stuffed fish, and chicken. Of course we did not observe Tradition strictly, but tried to celebrate holidays somehow.

In 1995 I visited Israel as a member of the Moscow delegation of invalids and veterans of war [13](#). I was invited to go with that delegation.

Only now I started studying Tradition seriously, because during Soviet time we had no opportunity to do it. It is a pity that I don't know Hebrew. I know Yiddish a little (I understand better than speak). As our sons grew up, they identified themselves as Jews. They go to synagogue sometimes, on the death-day of my second husband they order Kaddish.

Every Saturday I visit synagogue. I receive no help: as a disabled veteran I have a good pension. From Switzerland and Germany I got everything they were obliged to pay to ghetto prisoners.

- **Glossary**

### **1 Five percent quota**

In tsarist Russia the number of Jews in higher educational institutions could not exceed 5% of the total number of students.

### **2 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avmgar 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.

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

Russian critic and editor, who began his journalistic career in 1853 at *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), which he turned into the leading radical publication of the time. He emphasized the social aspect of literature. His novel *Chto delat* (What Is To Be Done?, 1863) was regarded as a revolutionary classic in the Soviet Union.

Chernyshevsky was arrested for revolutionary activities in 1862, sentenced to seven years of hard labor and twenty years of exile in Siberia. He was allowed to leave Siberia due to bad health condition in 1883 and spent the rest of his days in his native Saratov.

### **4 Gertzen, Alexander I**

(1812-1870): Russian revolutionary, writer and philosopher.

### **5 Dacha**

country house, consisting of small huts and little plots of lands. The Soviet authorities came to the decision to allow this activity to the Soviet people to support themselves. The majority of urban citizens grow vegetables and fruit in their small gardens to make preserves for winter.

## **6 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.

## **7 Enemy of the people**

Soviet official term; euphemism used for real or assumed political opposition.

## **8 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.

## **9 Annexation of Eastern Poland**

According to a secret clause in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact defining Soviet and German territorial spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union occupied Eastern Poland in September 1939. In early November the newly annexed lands were divided up between the Ukrainian and the Belarusian Soviet Republics.

**10 KGB:** The KGB or Committee for State Security was the main Soviet external security and intelligence agency, as well as the main secret police agency from 1954 to 1991.

**11 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.

## **12 Rehabilitation in the Soviet Union**

Many people who had been arrested, disappeared or killed during the Stalinist era were rehabilitated after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, where Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

It was only after the official rehabilitation that people learnt for the first time what had happened to their relatives as information on arrested people had not been disclosed before.

## **13 Moscow Council of the Jewish War Veterans**

founded in 1988 by the Moscow municipal Jewish community. The main purpose of the organization is mutual assistance as well as unification of front-line Jews, collection and publishing of recollections about the war, and arranging meetings with the public and youth.