

# Emma Nikonova

*I, Emma Frantsevna Nikonova was born in Vitebsk in 1931.*

*My maiden name is Babitskaya. My father and I lived in Veliky Luky, Mogilev and other cities where he worked as a vet. After my father was arrested in 1938, we do not know whether, he was executed because we never received an official document.*

*I returned to Vitebsk with my mother and younger brother, Edward.*

*We settled in my grandfather's private house in the center of the city. By the time the war started, I had completed the third grade of primary school.*

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## **My family background**

My grandfather and my mother's father, Movsha Yankelevich Zheleznyak was born in Vitebsk in 1885. I do not remember the date; after 1942 he celebrated it on May 20, because it was on this May Day in 1942 that the partisans rescued grandfather from the occupation of Vitebsk.

Grandfather began his independent life when he was ten-years-old by working odd jobs. His father owned a cart-horse and worked as a private carrier. When grandfather was still a little boy he wanted to become independent and he began to study house painting. At first he was a helper and then he even worked in a higher position: painted churches and tall houses. With time grandfather became well respected as a house painter and before World War II he worked in this field at the bristle factory in Vitebsk. My grandfather's life during Soviet rule was that of a typical working person, who had adapted himself to the regime, worked honestly and skillfully and did not get involved with politics.



Other than cheder, grandfather did not receive any other education. However his outstanding ability appeared most of all in creative work.

He wrote many poems, in which he showed his relationship to the society around him and events in his family. Grandfather had a great voice, bass, and sang in an independent choir, and successfully performed at Olympic Contests for which he more than once received awards, presents and travel packages to the sanatoria. He loved to recall with pleasure how at one competition in Vitebsk he was heard by the famous opera singer, Reizen. "If you had studied singing," the singer said to grandfather, "you would have become the second Shaliapin."

A decent material status allowed grandfather to build his own house and to give all three children a higher education. Both daughters became doctors and his son graduated from the Polytechnic Institute.

During the Second World War, to escape the Germans, the family fled east in evacuation. Grandfather took with him grandmother, his oldest daughter (i.e. my mother), my brother and me. We lived in evacuation in Krasnokamsky region of Bashkiria. There, grandfather worked as a watchman on a collective farm since mother as a veterinary doctor was not in the position to earn enough money on her own to feed the family.

Grandfather's sociability, kindness and disposition towards people, his ability to work with his hands, and natural sense of humor and gift for singing allowed him to become "one of the guys" everywhere that he worked. But, despite the fact that grandfather always worked in a collective of many nationalities, he remained true to his Jewish heritage. Before the war he and grandmother attended synagogue as regularly as possible and kept all Jewish traditions and customs. Of course grandmother tried to feed the family Jewish dishes. Between them they spoke only Yiddish.

After the end of the war when our family moved to the L'vov region, city Drogobych, grandfather returned to his earlier profession of painting. He sang in a choir at the Palace of Culture as long as he could and died in Drogobych in 1975.

My grandmother, Rakhil Shmuilovna Zheleznyak was born in Vitebsk in 1889 in a poor family. She did not receive any kind of education. According to everyone who knew her she was very beautiful in her youth. Grandmother never worked; she kept the house. She was calm, nice, easily forgiving, and agreeable with anything that grandfather suggested or decided. She was practically his shadow. Grandmother raised her grandchildren with tenderness. Grandmother died in 1963 in Riga, where she had gone to visit her youngest daughter the doctor, Rebecca.

The Zheleznyaks had three children. The youngest daughter, Rebecca Movshevna Deviatova (maiden name- Zheleznyak) was born in Vitebsk in 1914. She graduated from the medical institute in Vitebsk and immediately became a regular army doctor in 1938. In the first days of the war she left for the front and finished the war in Germany. Aunt Rebecca got married to Major Dmitry Deviatov and lived with him after the war in Riga. The youngest of the children, Yakov, was born in 1921. Later he was accepted into the Leningrad Industrial (later Polytechnic) Institute and was called to the army as a student to fight on the Finnish front. In 1941 he defended Leningrad; he was in the artillery. Then he fought in different battles and made it to Berlin. He is now 80 years old and lives in Nizhny Novgorod.

Two or three of Movsha's brothers lived abroad, and I can not remember their names. Grandad was in correspondence with them, but later he stopped writing them, because after each one he was summoned to the "First Department". The so-called First Departments were an inseparable part all enterprises, all educational institutions and so on. Their employees were assigned with the task of periodical checks of trustworthiness of every worker, student, et cetera.

My father, Franz Ludvigovich Babitsky, a Pole, was born in 1904 in the village Zavala of the Borisovsky region in Belarus. In 1926-1931 he studied in the veterinary institute in Vitebsk. It was there that he met my mother and they married in 1930. Upon graduation from the institute, father worked as a vet in the Red Army. This work required traveling a lot and thus mother, also being a vet took the children and followed father: first we lived in Veliky Luky and then in Mogilev.

### **During the war**

My parents were not members of the Party, but they were active in public life, as everybody was then. My father was a military vet, a major by rank. We used to live in military garrisons, always moving from town to town, at least once a year. We lived in Mogilev, in Veliky Luky and in many other places. The families of the military would only socialize with each other, not with civilians. It was considered good form to regularly visit the House of the Red Army: play billiards or take part in amateur performances. Mama would combine her work as bacteriologist with family duties and active participation in the ladies' council [a social organization of officers' wives]. She was involved with amateur performances, organized festivals for officers' children. I can remember one occasion. Once Mother was commissioned with acting as an old lady in one play. She was only 20 years old then and they made her up as a wrinkled old woman and put a wig on her head. Mother allowed me to sit in the performance hall among the adults. But when I saw Mommy on stage, I cried

bitterly and shouted: "I don't want my mother to be so old and ugly!" A burst of laugh interrupted the show.

In March 1938 father was arrested because of a wild accusation: it seemed like he participated in selling off army horses. Mother addressed various offices, including the Department of Domestic Affairs, the higher Soviet and traveled to Mogilev, Smolensk, and Moscow. But all her efforts were in vain - the verdict was: "10 years without the right of correspondence." It was 20 years later that people of my generation learned what was hidden behind the words of this saying. After many of Mother's attempts at appeals, one official in anger warned Mother: that if she keeps at it she will be in the same place her husband is. To that mother answered in an outburst: "It is still not known if you yourself will be sitting in your soft chair for so long." After that conversation mother waited every night for them to arrest her, but thank God this did not happen. The achievement and bravery of my mother in conversations with investigators never failed her in her whole life.

We later learned that father was executed in 1938. The Military Tribunal of the Belorussian Military District rehabilitated him in 1957 "for the absence of the alleged crime." I do not know where he's buried. The answers to the many questions of my mother have been either evasive or unintelligible.

My mother - Esfir Movshevna Babitskaya (maiden name- Zheleznyak) was born in Vitebsk in 1910. After the completion of high school she was accepted into the Vitebsk Veterinary Institute, which she graduated from, as father did, in 1931. That is where they met and married. Mother gave birth to two children: me in 1931 and my brother Edward in 1935, and in the course of a few years she worked in her field in Veliky Luki and Mogilev, where father served.

## **Growing up**

I was born in 1931, when Mother was in the fifth year at in her institute, and Grandma would bring me every day for her to feed me. I was fed under the stairs, away from people's eyes. Mother used to joke - I graduated from the institute together with her. I remember they lived very peacefully with Father. No outbursts of anger, no scandals, no offences. The family atmosphere was very calm. But immediately after father's arrest she was fired from work and she with two small children moved to Vitebsk to her parents. There she succeeded in finding work as a doctor- as a bacteriologist in a medical institute in the department of infectious diseases, which was located in a hospital for infections.

Before moving to Vitebsk, our living and financial conditions were typical for a family of a regular military officer of that time. Our flats

were provided by the state, but they were separate flats, not communal apartments. That was considered luxury then - your own separate flat. Father's salary and Mother's wages allowed for a nanny for my brother and me. Mother worked as a vet-doctor, and later as a bacteriologist.

I studied music, I had friends from my father's colleagues' families. I remember Vitebsk as a beautiful town, there were many trees and mainly wooden one-storied and two-storied buildings. Multi-storied buildings were very few. I liked that town for its cleanliness and a tranquil rhythm of provincial life.

Grandfather's house was located in the very center of Vitebsk in a quiet populated lane. Grandfather built it in the beginning of 1930s for Grandmother and himself. He knew that grandchildren would be coming, and so he built 3 extra rooms, a kitchen and several larders. Some relatives like his younger sister Manya and her husband Motya helped him. Motya was a beer seller, and beer was then bought by three-liter bottles and consumed at home. It was not customary to drink beer from mugs in street cafes like they do nowadays.

Grandfather's house was wood, with a brick foundation. The house was different from the neighboring ones because it was finished by Grandfather himself, and he was a top-class house painter. Granddad used to do everything with his own hands. I can clearly remember the beautiful ornaments and decorations. Every guest would admire his work. Of course it pleased Grandfather and us very much. There was an orchard near the house. There were many flowers too, and a vegetable garden behind the flower beds. Grandmother was very keen on flowers. When the guests would be leaving she would give everyone an enormous bouquet of flowers.

We were a close family and were regularly visited by Grandfather's sister Manya, her husband Motya and their kids: Lazar, who later became a lawyer, and Sonya (she became a doctor). All their family was lucky to leave for Nizny Tagil at the outbreak of war. They stayed there after the war was over.

Before we came to Vitebsk a two-storied school was built in front of Grandfather's house, and I became a pupil of that school. It was school # 22, named after Stalin. For some reason it was customary to give new schools the leader's name. School # 10, where Uncle Yakov was studying, was also called "Stalinskaya". I went to that school until 1941. When the Germans occupied the city, they established their headquarters in it.

The kitchen was the center of our family life. Everybody used to gather there - Mother, her younger sister Rita, a student of medical college, brother Yakov, Grandfather's friends and acquaintances and their children from Lekkert Street not far from our place.

Grandmother was so hospitable that she would be bored if there were no guests for several days. Rita's friends, students, and Yakov's classmates could be regularly found in our garden. They used to prepare their homework and get ready for their exams there. Grandmother liked them a lot. She kept waiting for them as if for a festival and used to treat them to all sorts of treats. Grandmother was an excellent Jewish cook: she was always making traditional stuffed fish, teigl, strudel, tsimes and flezel. Besides, she kept kosher. The Jewish holidays were lively, wonderful affairs and always so noisy. We celebrated Purim, Hanukkah, Pesach and other holidays. Grandmother always baked her own matzo.

Grandfather Movsha was the head of the family. He was the bread-winner, earned good money and resolved all current problems. It is noteworthy that the family could not sit down at the dinner table until Grandfather returned home from work, even if we were very hungry. We had to wait for him. The best piece of meat, even if the only one, would go on his plate and he was always the first one to be served. That was our family's way to pay tribute to our bread-winner.

There were more than 22,000 Jews in Vitebsk before the war. There was a synagogue too. (editor's note: dozens of synagogues were closed after the 1917 revolution). Of course many Jewish people who were communists feared to go there. But Grandfather was a simple house-painter and he regularly visited it. He went there more often than Grandmother. He sang in the synagogue choir and helped with maintenance work - he would paint, whitewash and climb if necessary - he was not afraid of heights.

I remember there was a municipal theater in Vitebsk. We used to see plays there, but they never presented anything Jewish. Public transport consisted of streetcars only. When I came to Vitebsk for a short time after the war, I couldn't even recognize it. The city was not only restored, but rebuilt anew and per new designs - now you could see multi-storied apartment blocks, administrative buildings, Houses of Culture. Vitebsk became a big city, and its transportation system was well developed.

During my first years in school I was not an excellent pupil. I am embarrassed to say that I was always up to mischief, played tricks and even fought. But I had a very good handwriting and was always summoned up to the blackboard when something had to be written. I had a talent for music. In Vitebsk a Polish lady Maria Antonovna came to us to give me musical lessons. She made friends with my mum. I was disobedient and hid in the garden, I did not want to study. Mum was very upset. She tried to play with me, sat beside me to encourage music lessons. She loved music, unlike me. They had no piano at home and she used to go to her relatives to learn to play. The piano appeared in our house only when my parents got married. It was not a simple piano. It was an instrument by the famous firm "Bekker",



which my parents have bought on an auction. It belonged to the pre-revolutionary governor of Vitebsk.

I sang in a school chorus. I participated in all holidays, and Grandmother made me festive dresses for school. I perfectly remember my first teacher, she was loved by all children. She always wore brown clothes. In our class there were many Jewish children, but I can not recollect any anti-Semitic actions.

Before the very beginning of the war Mum had taken us children to Aunt Rita, her sister, for vacations. Rita was a military doctor in 1941 and lived in a hospital in the town of Lenele near Vitebsk. There, on June 22, we learned about the war. Rita's military colleagues took us by car to Orsha, and there we managed to get on a train to Vitebsk. The following week the Germans entered the city.

When the Germans captured Minsk in the first days of the war in 1941, the family of Movsha Yankelevich Zheleznyak did not leave the city, due to the fact that my mom could not leave the sick in the hospital. And without her my grandfather and grandmother did not want to be evacuated.

The situation in Vitebsk became was frightening. Having retreated, parts of the Red Army blew up factories in the industrial zone of Vitebsk on the opposite bank from our house as well as the bridge spanning the Dvina. Germans continually bombed the city and from their airplanes fired machine guns along the streets. Fires broke out in all the regions of Vitebsk.

People abandoned their homes. Our family hid in one of the ravines, but grandfather returned home to put out the fire in our house. He poured water and sand on it. On our street only three buildings were left whole, including grandfather's house. Grandfather sheltered all the neighbors, fed them his stored food, and gave them clothing and bedding. Jumping ahead a little, I will say that our very grateful non-Jewish neighbors saved grandfather's entire family in the time that followed.

July 10, 1941 German forces entered the city. Before the war 22,000 Jews lived in Vitebsk. After the occupation German propaganda portrayed Jews as culprits of World War II and enemies of Germany. The destruction of Jews in Vitebsk began with the order that all Jews should be registered within two days and whoever does not do this could be shot. The following sign appeared: "All Jews, from the age of 10 years, must sew yellow symbols on ones clothing. One on the chest and the other on the back." My mother did not obey the order. The next order was that all Jewish men must show up for the work of cleaning the street, since the Germans said that Jews were also the culprits of the fire in Vitebsk. All those who showed up were sent to work for two days and then 400 men were sent to the Tula

ravine and shot as the punishment "for the burning of Vitebsk".

All remaining Jews were ordered to move to the other bank of the Dvina, but were allowed to have only one trip's worth of belongings with them. Since the bridge was destroyed the only way to cross was by boat. The Germans placed criminals from the local population on the oars and they carried women, children and the elderly out to the middle of the river and threw them from the boats and drowned them. Those who tried to save themselves were hit with the oars. Germans on the shore took pictures of these scenes and together with the local police joked and laughed. In this manner, several thousand people were murdered. The Jews who remained alive were forced into the building of a local club, put barbed wire around it and placed a post with the sign "Ghetto, beware of infection!" Germans guarded the ghetto around the clock. It was forbidden to talk with the imprisoned. At night drunk Germans would come and rape girls before their mothers' eyes. The people in the ghetto did not receive any food and were so weak that it was senseless to guard them. Even if there was a desire to escape they did not have enough strength to do so. From our bank we could watch how the prisoners moved and others, not moving, lay among the wreck.

Up to 60 people died daily in the ghetto. In some time according to a fight against an epidemic, all those still alive were taken away in cars to a ravine in Tula. At the same four or five cars came up to the ravine. The people in them were tortured and shot while the rest waited their turn. Children were thrown into pits alive. All in all 22,000 Jews were murdered in Vitebsk. How many survived and left to evacuation, I do not know.

Grandfather decided that he and grandmother needed to obey the order and move to the other bank on the Dvina. Their neighbors, the Meshkovskys, led grandfather across and found a quiet place. Later grandmother was taken with our neighbor Sofia Andreevna, who waved her passport and yelled that there were only Russians in the boat. Thus she saved our grandma. But the neighbors did not take grandfather and grandmother to the ghetto. They hid them at their acquaintances, the Kukhts, in their private home at the edge of Vitebsk.

Later mother decided to take her parents back because it was feared that someone could turn them in although the neighbors sheltering them were decent people. Our neighbors, the Valukasys brought the elderly couple home once again.

The winter of 1941-1942 was cold and our neighbors the Meshkovskys helped us to escape from death by starvation. They were not Jewish. They sold or exchanged our things for food in villages 50-80 km outside the city. It was still possible while the Germans had not robbed the farmers down to their last straw. The Germans then took everything from them-



vegetables, bread, pigs, and birds. I remember that in addition to the Meshkovskys, other neighboring women sold and exchanged our things.

The children of the neighbors gathered empty metal cans around the German camp and brought them to us. Grandfather soldered them and the neighbor children sold our mugs at the market.

Also at the very beginning of the occupation, when our family was not registered, based on mother's decision, grandfather tore out a cellar in the house, and a bed covered the entrance. Over the bed was a carpet. In response to a slight knock at the door or a noise on the courtyard grandfather and grandmother hid in the cellar. We lived with this fright for 11 months.

Mother did not look Jewish and she was able to find work in a hospital, where she met the doctor of the tuberculosis ward, Ksenia Sergeevna Okolovich. This doctor helped get Russian passports for mother, grandfather and grandmother. In addition to her, other people who had a connection with the partisans helped in the processing of documents. Okolovich helped to save many Jews and Soviet prisoners of war. In 1941-1942 she forged documents for approximately 100 people and in April 1942 took a large group of Soviet prisoners of war to the partisans.

When massacres occurred in the city mother sent my brother and me to relatives, the Zhizhnevskys, in the neighboring village, the name of which I do not remember. There we were fed well, bathed in the tub, and rode bicycles. But soon mother took us back to the city. During this time a few girls from the partisan group spent the night in our home as they were going to Vitebsk on assignment.

In the spring of 1941 Okolovich told mother that all of us needed to leave Vitebsk immediately and go to a partisans' regiment, from which we would be sent through the battlefront line. Mother agreed and the underground workers began to prepare the needed documents and permits, known by the name "ausvais" (editor's note: from the German ausweis). However, unexpectedly mother's parents rejected the idea. They believed that since no one had yet turned them in they would rather stay and risk it. They said they didn't want to give up their home and their possessions. Mother was so angry that she grabbed a long stick and started smashing glasses and dishes. Grandmother and Grandfather agreed to leave with us..

The first to leave with the partisans was Grandfather, in May 1941. He was led to the most partisan of the groups, 15km from Vitebsk. After a few days Grandmother also left with the partisans. Mother and I were the last and we left on our own, accompanied by no one. We were met just outside the city and there we met grandmother and grandfather. Mother had

helped a few women doctors hide from the Germans in Vitebsk. Now with the help of Okolovich and underground people, they were all given documents and they joined partisan groups.

When we, having crossed through the front line, arrived to Bashkiria in August 1942, we hardly had any clothes to wear. I had nothing to put on to go to school. And in winter it was up to -30/- 40 degrees cold. For the first half a year I didn't go to school at all. Other children used to bring the tasks to me, and I would do everything at home.

Grandfather and mother each had 30 thousand Soviet rubles with them: before we left Vitebsk our neighbors bought things from us. During the first check in the partisan regiment NKVD officials took our money from us. Then we left for Gorky and met Grandfather there and from there we were evacuated to Bashkirya. Grandfather worked on a collective farm as guard and mother as a guest veterinarian. We had neither money nor clothing. Mother wrote a complaint to Lavrenty Beria<sup>1</sup> about the confiscation of 60 thousand rubles from us by executives of his department. My mother's actions were very brave for the time, but this was like my mother- a person of principle and without fear. In regard to my mother's complaint, believe it or not they returned every last kopeck to us.

### **After the war**

After the war in a letter from Vitebsk my mother was notified that a few days after we left to the partisans, the Germans came to our home and asked about the location of doctor Babitskaya and her children.

I remember having changed very much during our time in the east during the evacuation. I became an excellent pupil. Mum was so loved at her work that everyone tried to help us with clothes. Somebody had given us a coat, another person presented a fur cap, yet another - a pair of valenki [a kind of felt footwear]. And in the second half-year, from February, I started to go to school in warm clothes. But I was embarrassed over the huge cap and used to take it off before reaching the school.

In Bashkirya I completed the fourth and fifth grades of secondary school and during that period my mother worked as a bacteriologist in a hospital and Grandfather - as a watchman in a collective farm.

In 1944 all our family moved to Krasnodar Territory, now this place is called Apsheronsk. Mum worked in a veterinary hospital there. I finished 10 classes of school.

I finished each class with an honorary diploma, but I received no medal. I got "4" for the composition. I want to explain why that happened. Mum advised me not to tell anybody about Father, but just say that he simply died of an illness. But I did not listen to her and told them that

he was arrested. And a colleague told Mum that "your daughter was not given the medal because she is the daughter of an enemy of the people". The school years are still fresh in my memory because of a wonderful chorus, where I sang. We went to collective-farm fields to work. We sawed fire wood in the forest, and took it to the city for heating.

In Bashkiria for the first time I felt anti-Semitism. When we arrived there and went for a walk with my brother, neighbor's children ran and shouted: "Jewish muzzles! Jewish muzzles!" (referring to our noses). But in Apsheronk it was even worse: Mum was given a two-room apartment within the hospital territory as the head of the laboratory. Grandfather and Grandmother lived with us. But it appeared that one of the doctors of that hospital liked the apartment very much. And once he got drunk, and with an axe and tried to break into our apartment at night, shouting: "Get out of here, Jews! It's my apartment!" He would have hacked us to death if other doctors hadn't come and calmed him down.

In Apsheronk Mum met Efroim Altman. He was also from Poland, like my Daddy, but a Polish Jew, who was sent with a Polish labor regiment to rebuild Apsheronk. He courted Mum for a long time and, at last, made her a proposal. Mum did not dare to say "yes." I was small and did not understand adult problems, I told her every day that she should wait for Father. I was sure that he would return in 10 years, as it was written on his verdict. Once I even ran away from home, another time I announced a hunger-strike. What could I say: I was very upset. Certainly it was not Efroim's fault; any man would be an enemy in the place of my father. My rough and negative reaction to Mum's marriage must be explained by the fact that I remembered and continued to love Daddy, and in Mother's acceptance of a new husband would be the betrayal of his memory. But both Mum and Efroim demonstrated patience, and at last I surrendered. I understood my mistake and valued this man very highly. He did not receive a higher education in Poland, but was very well-read. He knew several Jewish authors by heart, cited the Jewish Wars by Josephus, and he knew the history of all confessions. He had read all the published literature on Zionism, on Judaism, and constantly told us about what he had read. All my knowledge on religious topics I have received from Efroim.

Efroim was very religious. Like all convinced people he would educate Mum on these issues. He elucidated her on the history of all confessions. Mum arranged for us children to take part in these conversations. I understood the meaning of what Efroim told us only much later. Then I listened to it as to some interesting legends or myths.

He kept trying to persuade Mum and all of us to emigrate to Israel after 1948, or join our relatives in Poland or America or Argentina. He corresponded with his relatives, and they even sent invitations for us. His

brothers lived in all these countries. They grew rich and everyone succeeded in their own businesses. And he was a beggar in Apsheronk. Not having a higher education he had to work as a simple worker in warehouses. Mum was convincing him that his rich relatives would not want to support us, that we didn't know languages, and we could not expect anything good if we moved abroad. But from time to time she too was dreamt of emigration. And eventually it turned out that while she studied in her institute, the time had come when it became impossible to leave Russia or even maintain serious contact with friends or relatives abroad. Until now I regret that we didn't listen to Efroim then. Now I know how right he was about Zionism and Judaism and the state of Israel. In our family it was Efroim's son Vladimir who had eventually left for Israel, as well as my younger brother Edward, and my granddaughter Natasha.

Later, when I lived with my family in Leningrad, Efroim came with Mother a few times to visit us in the city and in our summer cottage. They spent a few summers there with my step-brother Vladik. And when Vladik's daughters were born, they came with them for the whole summer.

As I said, Grandfather saved our house from fire in 1941. Still, by the end of war, the house had burned down. Our neighbors wrote and told us. Mum and her parents decided not to come back to Vitebsk, and from evacuation they went to the unfamiliar Western Ukraine - to Rovno, and then to Drogobych. In Rovno we lived less than a year. We didn't like it there and moved to Drogobych, where we stayed.

When the family moved to Drogobych in Western Ukraine from Apsheronk, Efroim welcomed this decision, since it was nearer to the border with Poland. And as soon as we arrived to Drogobych, he started trying to persuade Mum to leave at least for Poland. He did not believe that anything could change in the USSR, or that public anti-Semitism would disappear, and he was deathly afraid of Stalin, believing that the destiny of Jews in this country was predetermined. Here it was not my fault that Mum decided not to go to Poland then. The explanation was very simple. Mum had settled in rather well and received an apartment, which was very lucky at those times.

I entered institute very easily. I passed all examinations with excellent marks and received a room in a hostel. There were many problems; we were often cold and hungry, but youth can overcome all this! I was very actively engaged in sports gymnastics.

By the time of Stalin's death I already knew a lot. Mum had many friends with the same fate as hers. Their husbands or brothers had vanished as well. When Daddy was arrested, Mum tried to hide this fact from me, but I would pretend that I was sleeping and listened to her conversations with friends. When Stalin died, not a tear fell from my eyes. I despised those

who cried. I loved Father very much and hated those who had executed him: Beria, Ezhov, Yagoda and the whole company. I trusted Mum, and told her that I hated them. And Mum, as a doctor, feared that too much hatred would accumulate in my soul.

In 1954 I graduated with honors from the Leningrad Engineering Institute. The specialization of architectural engineering became the specialization for my whole family. My husband graduated from the same institute as well as both of my sons and one daughter-in-law.

"The Doctors' Affair" had directly touched Mum. In 1952 she worked in Drogobych as the head of a bacteriological laboratory. They threatened to fire her, but they didn't; they only lowered her in rank because she worked very well. Still, conditions for her and her Jewish colleagues in this hospital greatly deteriorated. Then the chief physician of another hospital, who respected Mum, asked her if she would become the head of a similar bacteriological laboratory. She started working there immediately.

Certainly, I, as any other citizen of the USSR, perfectly knew that Jews could get jobs only by acquaintance or due to very outstanding abilities. In the design institute of shipbuilding, where I had worked most part of my life, a colleague had confidentially told me that there was a secret instruction not to hire Jews at all, with an exception of relatives or if by recommendation. For me it was like a thunder among the clear skies! In the Institute of Construction Engineering, where I studied in Leningrad, 50% of those enrolled must have been Jewish as were many of the teachers.

To tell you the truth, when I was a student, there was a particular case connected with anti-Semitism. We were very good friends with a Russian girl, Katya Ruchkina, we shared the hostel room, cooked meals and did everything together, being what they call "bosom friends." And suddenly Katya started avoiding me and grew so cold. I couldn't understand what happened, and only years after graduation did I run into a friend who told me what the story was: she told me that someone had told Katya that I was Jewish on maternal side. And Katya's family was infected with anti-Semitism: "I can't believe it, I have never thought that Emma was Jewish!" she was to have said. Back then and now I can not understand why we were considered people of lowest grade. In Bashkiria I also couldn't comprehend the reason - why they were throwing stones at us and offending us only because we were Jews.

I liked my profession. I was lucky to work in good collectives. I was only irritated by the fact everyone was now and then summoned to "The First Department" and asked where one was during the war, about the fate of one's close relatives, etc. I was terribly scared of the chief of the First Department, and avoided running into him in the corridor. When I was

applying for the job, I was afraid that I'd be declined if I wrote the truth. Therefore, I did not confess that my father had been arrested. This all took place, I should say, before the mass rehabilitations. Before that I did not write in the questionnaires that I was in evacuation either, but that we had stayed in the region.

### **Husband and children**

My husband, Nikolai Nikonov was born in 1929 in Tula region. We got married in 1956 and have not separated since. He's got no anti-Semitic feelings to anybody at all. He is very kind, soft, sympathetic man, devoted to his family. He has been building and repairing bridges in Leningrad all his life.

Our children do not feel themselves as Jews, although my granddaughter definitely does (she's daughter of our elder son Natasha). She not only has left for Israel without any influence from our family, but decided not to come back to Russia. Now she is a student and she is 22 years old.

My eldest son Aleksei was born in Leningrad in 1957. He and his wife Galina work as architectural engineers. They have two children: Natasha (born in 1979) lives in Israel, and Masha (born in 1983) lives and studies in St. Petersburg in the same engineering institute. My younger son, Vladimir, was born in 1967 and is an architectural engineer and lives in St. Petersburg. He is divorced and his son Ivan in three and a half years old. Our younger son Vladimir divorced his wife when their son was only 1.5 years old. It's a big misfortune for all of us, especially for my husband. Nowadays all his life is focused on our small grandson.

### **Recent years**

My younger brother, Edward Babitsky was born in 1935 and graduated from the technical school. He served in the navy fleet. He currently lives with his family in Israel. My stepbrother, Vladimir Altman was born in 1950 and is a welder by profession. He has now immigrated to Israel with his family. These families are friends there and often spend their free time together.

I visited them not long ago and took away with me wonderful impressions of the Israeli government and the decent lifestyle of my brothers. In addition, my granddaughter Natasha loves living there. .

[Impressions from the first minutes of meeting Emma Frantsevna Nikonova: modest, quiet woman. This is how those people usually look who lived a calm, moderate life not filled with violent events. However the impression quickly changes during the story of Emma about her un-childlike sufferings, happening to her during her childhood up to and in the period



of the Holocaust. This once again supports the well-known truth: "Appearances are deceiving." Despite ailments and early disabilities, the memory of Emma kept all the details and events, connected with the arrest of her father in 1938 and his death that year, the eleven months of living in Fascist hell, the escape from that hell, the prosperous period on the battlefield, and the chronology of family events occurring during that period. Life to some degree rewarded Emma Nikonova. Except for her father, all of her relatives remained whole and unhurt. She has a great husband and devoted sons. Emma and her spouse Nikolai Nikonov live apart from their children, but play an active role in the raising of their grandchildren.

Being Jewish on her maternal side and Polish on her father's lineage, Emma acknowledges her belonging to the Jewish nation, as the only evidence of a genetic connection with her mother and ancestors. In order to get a sense of this she often visits Hesed and very grateful to it's workers for the help she receives as a disabled person and also for the opportunity to use the hospitality and cultural programs of Hesed.]

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1 Lavrenty Berya - Marshal of the USSR, the closest friend of Stalin, one of the organizers of mass repressions of 1930-50-s. Executed in 1953.