

# Tsylvia Liatun

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Odessa

Ukraine

Interviewer: Tatiana Portnaya

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*Tsylvia Liatun is a small woman with bright brown eyes. She is a very lively and active person; during our conversation, Tsylvia jumped up several times to take care of something in the house. She lives in a three-room apartment together with her daughter and her daughter's family. Tsylvia is responsible for the entire household - she cleans, knits, and sews for her relatives.*



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### **Family Background**

My grandfather on my mother's side Shymon Videtskiy was born in Riga [Latvia, then the part of Russia]. Regretfully, I cannot tell you even approximate date of his birth. All I know about him is that he was a high skilled tailor. He was particularly good at darning that was a very rare skill at the time. He could darn a tailcoat or tuxedo in such fashion that couldn't even find the spot that he had darned. Grandfather cut fabrics and grandmother and an employee assisted him to put together a shirt or another piece of clothing. My grandfather was a tall man with gray hair. He had a terrific sense of humor and he was called 'governor of laughter': he knew a number of anecdotes and knew when to tell a joke. My grandparents lived in a 3-room apartment in Marinyinskaya Street near the center of the city. It wasn't richly furnished, but it was ideally clean and tidy. My grandfather wore ordinary clothes. When going to synagogue he put on a kippah or a hat. There were quite a few synagogues in Riga, but grandfather went to the main synagogue in Gogol Street. It was a beautiful synagogue. Germans burnt it with people inside during the Great Patriotic War [1](#). In the morning grandfather prayed, having his tallit on. We often visited grandparents at Sabbath. Grandmother put on a kerchief and lit two candles and grandfather said kiddush. They spoke Yiddish in the family. At the end of his life grandfather had diabetes and went blind. Grandfather died in 1930 when I was 7 years old. He was buried in accordance with the Jewish traditions. There was a Chevra Kaddisha at the synagogue: undertaker's group. They put special clothing on my grandfather [takrikhim - simple linen shroud.] My mother was wearing a torn dress and the family observed shivah for a week. We were overwhelmed with grief: we loved grandfather a lot.

My grandmother on my mother's side Rosa Videtskaya was born in Riga in 1859. She was a wise, reserved and brave woman that supported and helped her husband through the lifetime. They were a poor family. During WWI they starved. Grandmother forced grandfather to make underwear for soldiers that she sold at the market. Grandmother Rosa never complained or cried in front of her children or grandchildren. We loved her dearly. One could always discuss any subject with her. I don't think grandmother had any education. She only spoke Yiddish. Grandmother Rosa was shot by Germans in 1941 when Riga was occupied. Grandmother Rosa had four children. She raised them in strictness. They were all very close. All children were born in Riga.

My mother's older sister Dora was born in 1883. She finished a Russian grammar school and spoke 4 languages: Russian, German, Latish and Yiddish. She was very hardworking and always helped grandmother. Dora got married young. Her husband Abram was a very handsome young man. He finished cheder and was religious. He spent his days in prayers and reading the Torah. Grandfather Shymon even got exasperated with him 'Abram, you are a good Jew spending a lot of your time in prayers, but you have a wife and children. Who is going to provide for them?' Dora's family was very poor. Dora worked at grandfather's shop and her husband Abram also learned to cut fabrics and sew in due time. They had four children. Their older son Solomon, a very handsome boy, finished a music school. He sang beautifully and played the piano and other instruments. Solomon married a Jewish girl after he returned from the Latvian army. Dora's son Ilia, a charming red-haired boy, lived with us until he finished the 4th form at school.. Dora was very poor and we helped her as much as we could. When he was a senior student at school Ilia got fond of communist ideas and began to attend communist meeting. Someone reported on him and Ilia was imprisoned. My father left a bail for him, he was released on condition that he goes somewhere else and he moved to Lithuania nearby where he finished school. The third son Tsalel was born in 1923. Dora's younger daughter Rebecca was born around 1925. Dora's family - her husband Abram and her children (Solomon and his wife, Ilia, Tsalel and Rebecca) perished in the ghetto in Riga.

My mother's older brother Max was born in 1885. He studied at Russian grammar school and music school. Max had a beautiful voice and sang in the choir at the synagogue and in the concerts. In 1901, when he turned 16, he went to study at the conservatory in Germany. A community from Latvia paid for his education. Max settled down in the capital of Germany. At 20 he married a Jewish girl. One year before Hitler came to power my mother went to visit him. Max had a poor heart and was taking medical treatment at a resort. When he was coming back from there his whole family came to meet him at the station: his wife, children, grandchildren and my mother. He got so excited that he had a heart attack when he saw them. The ambulance arrived too late: uncle Max died at the railway station. Max' wife perished in a German concentration camp. They had three children: older son Walter, daughter Ilza and a younger son, whose name I don't remember. Walter was married to a German woman. They had three children.. After Hitler came to power Walter's wife got a divorce and left with her daughter. Walter and his sons (they were circumcised) perished in a concentration camp in Germany in 1940. Uncle Max' second son emigrated to South America at the beginning of 1933. I have no more information about him. Max' daughter Ilza moved to her grandmother Dora in Riga hoping to move to South America from there, but she failed. Ilza perished in 1941 when Germans occupied Latvia. She and my grandmother Rosa were shot.

My mother's younger sister Zhenia was born in 1889. She finished grammar school like my mother. After school she was an assistant at my grandfather's shop. She got married at 21. My grandmother told me that Zhenia had a traditional wedding with a chuppah. Her husband's name was Sasha Medynch, but I don't remember his Jewish name. After their wedding Zhenia and her husband lived with my grandmother. Zhenia had two children: Semyon and Lyuba. She was a housewife. Her husband was a timber dealer and earned good money. He spoke fluent German, English and Latish. At home the family spoke Yiddish. Zhenia, her husband and two daughters perished in the ghetto in Riga. I don't know how it happened.

My mother Sarah-Maria Videtskaya was born in 1887. She was a middle daughter in the family. She finished a grammar school like all other children in the family. My mother was a very reserved, intelligent and well-read person. I don't remember her ever raising her voice at anyone in her life.

I have practically no information about my grandfather on my father's side Khanaan Kats. He died in 1901 when my father was 12. Grandfather lived in the town of Ionishkis in Lithuania.

I remember my father's mother Shprintse Kats well. She was born in 1863. I guess, she was born in Lithuania [then the part of Russia]; I don't know her maiden name. My grandmother spoke German, Russian and Lithuanian. She read a lot. She used to read a pile of newspapers. I guess, she must have got education, but I don't know where she studied. Grandmother spoke Yiddish at home. She was very religious. She didn't wear a wig, but she always had her head covered with a lace kerchief. Grandmother strictly observed kashrut and watched that all members of the family observed the rules using the right utensils and tableware. She celebrated Sabbath and taught my sister and me that a woman was to light two candles and a girl - one candle and we liked listening to her. She said prayers in Hebrew and we learned them with her. My aunts told me that they lived in a small two-storied house in Ionishkis. They kept geese, chickens, ducks and a cow. Later grandmother and her children moved to Riga where grandmother lived with her son Izia. When the Great Patriotic War began grandmother and younger children tried to escape from Riga. Grandmother was ill and they carried her on a stretcher. She begged her children to leave her in Riga and escape while it was possible to escape, but they couldn't leave her. They all perished. I don't know any details: I got all this information from their neighbors when I visited Riga. Grandmother had 8 children. They all were born in Ionishkis. She raised them and gave them education.

My father's sister Ella was born in 1891. She finished a Russian school and got married in Riga. Her husband was a hardworking man. They worked at a store and got rich soon. They had a nice apartment not far from where we lived. As all the other our relatives they visited as very often - on Sabbath and all the Jewish and family holydays. Aunt Ella had two children: daughter Rebecca and son David. They all perished in the ghetto in Riga.

My father's sister Tsylia was born in 1910s. She was married to Mr. Fridlinberg. They lived in a small town of Elgava, near Riga. They had two children: son Jacob and daughter Rachel. I don't know what they did for a living, but when they visited us they looked happy and content. They all perished in the ghetto in Riga.

My father's sister Nadia was the next child. She married a very religious man in Riga. I believe he was a rabbi. Aunt Nadia worked at my father's store. She had four daughters. Her husband kept

telling her that he wanted a son and that she would have children until one of them was a boy. Their son was their fifth child. Aunt Nadia, her husband and their five children perished in the ghetto in Riga.

My aunt Mina was the 5th child in the family. After getting married she moved to a small town of Valka near the border in Estonia. She had two children. At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War her husband (I don't remember his name) was recruited to the front. Mina and her children managed to evacuate to Fergana. I know that they returned to Valka in 1944. Aunt Mina was the only survivor of the Holocaust of my father's sisters. Aunt Mina and her husband lived to an old age and died and were buried in Estonia. Her daughter Eta moved to Israel in 1970s, and sons Khenah and Sholom emigrated to USA in the same year.

My father's sister Slava worked at my father's store. She was married and had a son. My father's younger brother Izia lived with grandmother. Father bought a small store for him where he worked before the war. My father's younger sister Frida was born in 1901. She lived in our house and helped father in the store before she got married. She was pregnant when the war began. When fascists were not far from Riga grandmother Rosa, aunt Slava, her husband and son, uncle Izia and Frida and her husband tried to escape, but were killed by Germans. Our neighbors, friends and acquaintances told me about it when I visited Riga.

My father Mendel-Leib Kats, born in 1889, was the oldest child in the family. When grandfather died my father was 12. He realized there was nobody, but himself he could rely upon. Around 1901 he left Lithuania for Riga where he became a courier in a haberdashery store. He had no profession, but he had a good conduct of German and could read and write well. His master liked him a lot. Father was honest and hardworking and soon became a trade agent traded with haberdashery. He traveled in the country executing trade deals. He also studied at the Russian grammar school. He finished grammar school by passing exams without attending classes. He was eager to start his own business, but he could only dream about it since he had no money. He even found a small store in the center of Riga that he liked. He showed it to us later. He went to walk past this store pretending he was an owner, but there was a long way to go before he could become an owner. My father worked and sent his mother some money to support her.

Father met my mother in 1912. They started seeing each other, when in 1914 World War I began and my father was recruited to the army. My father didn't like to talk about his service in the army that lasted 7 years [Because of World War I, October Revolution [2](#) and Civil War [3](#)]. But thank God, the war was over and he returned home around 1921. My father talked with my mother's father Shymon and they appointed the day of their wedding. My parents had a traditional wedding with a chuppah in 1921, but there was no wedding party since they were so poor that they couldn't afford one. My father was 32 and my mother was 34 when they got married.

My parents rented a small one-room apartment. There was only a bed in their room. The political situation in the town as in the land was unstable till 1922: the power switched from one group to another and there was shooting heard all around [In February 1922 Latvia became an independent republic]. Once my mother was sitting by the window. She was pregnant with my older sister. All of a sudden a stray bullet flew in few centimeters above my mother's head hitting the wall behind her. My mother got so scared that she started premature labor. They called a doctor. My sister was born seven months old. She was so weak that there was little hope she would make it into this

world. My father wrapped her tiny body into cotton wool and tried to warm her with his breathing. All of a sudden the baby began to mew like a kitten. The doctor began to pour cold and hot water on her and slap her on her cheeks and bum to make her cry. And she did – she fought for her life! This was how my sister Rebecca Kats was born into this world. I, Tsylia Kats, was born on 26 February 1923.

## Growing Up

My father was thinking about starting his own business. His landlord helped him. He suggested that my father rented a facility for a store on the ground floor and gave my father some money without having any guarantee to get it back. He saw that my father was very business-oriented and trusted him. My father began selling bagels and was a success. Gradually he began to purchase haberdashery, fabrics and underwear in Germany. He finished a commercial school and learned English after the wedding. He also knew French, German and Latish. My father often traveled. He attended famous World exhibitions in Paris and London and knew the market for his goods very well. Later he rented the 2nd floor for a haberdashery store. He was awarded the title of First Guild Merchant [4](#). He had many business contacts with many people of different origin. They often came to us, even to dinner to our home, but they were not friends. My parents only had Jewish friends.

My father was a handsome slender man with blue eyes and wavy dark auburn hair. He was hot-tempered, but also quick to calm down. My sister and I were afraid of him when he was angry. Our father happened to come home after work and sit down to read newspapers. At such moments my sister and I knew that he was in bad mood and didn't bother him until he called us. We were not punished, although my sister was every now and then for lying. My father didn't like people lying. He used to say that if a person could lie than he might steal, too. I didn't lie and was his pet.

We lived in a beautiful 5-room apartment with a bay window. We had a big dining room with carved furniture. Chests of drawers and cupboards were decorated with beautiful carvings. There was a big roundtable and 12 chairs there. There was also a big living room and an expensive German grand piano that my sister played on it. There were two children's rooms: one my sister's and one mine, and our parents' bedroom. There were many beautiful things at home. There were few pictures. Father bought only originals that were way too expensive. I remember one picture. It was 'Appassionato' hanging above the piano in the living room. I don't know its painter, but I liked it tremendously. There were polished parquet floors in all rooms. We had two housemaids. At first, Julia, she got married and left. And after Julia was Manya. Manya was my mother's classmate in grammar school. They were close friends and Manya was almost one of us. She was strict and my sister and I obeyed her even more than our parents. She spoke Russian to us and I learned Russian from her.

I had a happy childhood. I had a nanny (grandmother Rosa nursed my sister ) since my mother had to assist father at the store. I had a Lithuanian nanny that spent a lot of time with me taking me for walks and entertaining me. She didn't allow other people even to look at me protecting me from an evil eye. When I grew older my parents hired a Russian governess that had professional education. She was called 'Miss' in the house. She was Russian, but she was a Catholic. My older sister Rebecca went to school, our mother and father were at work, housemaid was busy about the house and I spent my days with the 'Miss'. Once she took me to the cathedral. It was beautiful there. It smelled of incense and there were candles burning. I liked it there and shared my impressions with

my parents in the evening. My mother told the governess off and even thought of firing her, but then she was forgiven.

I was still a small girl when my father received a letter from grandmother Shprintse. She wrote that their cow died and life became hard. My father took all his brothers and sisters to Riga opening stores for them and renting apartments. Grandmother Shprintse stayed with us for some time. When all our relatives got together there were 62 of us. My mother told me this number. We had a traditional family that observed all covenants of the Torah. We only bought kosher food and had kosher dishes and utensils. Our housemaid Manya watched that kashrut was strictly observed in our house, although she was a Russian woman. She told us off if we mixed dishes for meat and dairy products. Poultry and meat was purchased in special Jewish stores. We had a Torah, tallit and siddurim at home. All accessories for Sabbath were silver. We had beautiful dishes for Pesach that were kept on the attic. Before Pesach there was a major clean up of the house. We gave away all bread products left to other, non-Jewish people. There was not a single breadcrumb at home during Pesach. There was matzah and a matzah cake made at Pesach. My father made special wine. There were delicious dumplings that I make nowadays, too. Mother and Manya made Gefilte fish. My father put on his tallit on big holidays and went to pray at the synagogue. All big holidays we celebrated at home and all our relatives came to us while my father was the richest among them. We spoke Yiddish in the family and said prayers in Hebrew. My sister and I had our small siddurim. Our friends were children from a Jewish school. We spoke Yiddish with them and they were allowed to visit us at home. We spoke Yiddish in public places as well, although it wasn't quite common in Latvia. Letts are anti-Semitic, I believe, but since they are so reserved I never heard any abusive comments addressed to Jews.

My sister Rebecca went to the 'Riga Jewish school and grammar school'. Rebecca was a talented girl and always had a hobby that interfered with her studies, but since she was quick and smart she had best marks at school. Rebecca was a kind girl. She always brought home homeless or ill cats. She was very good at music. She went to a music school studying to play the piano. There were often music parties arranged at our home where Rebecca and our cousin brothers and sisters played various musical instruments.

In 1930 I went to the same school that my older sister studied at. This was a Jewish state school for girls. There were 40 pupils in a class. The subjects were taught in German. We studied Latin, English, French and Hebrew. At our religious classes we studied traditions and history of the Jewish people. We also studied prayers. Every morning we said a prayer in Hebrew and then sang the anthem of Latvia. I met Esia Kaplan that became my very close friend. We are still friends. I was good at my studies, but I didn't like mathematics and called my teacher 'a cobra'. My father helped me to do my homework and I seemed to understand what he tried to explain, but at school, as soon as my name was called I began to tremble all over and forgot everything I seemed to know. My parents were trying to teach me to play the piano, but the moment I sat down for my music class I began to cry loudly and did my utmost to demonstrate my misery. This lasted 3 years until I stirred up my parents' pity and they allowed me to quit the music school. When I was in the 4th form of secondary school I was enrolled in a private ballet school. I also had a French and English teachers that gave me classes at home. I read a lot. My mother was worried that I spent a lot of time studying and didn't take enough rest, but my father believed it was better to engage a child to the utmost to allow no waste of time. In 1934 I became a member of 'Betar' - an organization for

Jewish boys and girls that studied Hebrew, history of Palestine. We dreamed about going to the Promised land to build the state of Israel. We sang songs in Hebrew. We had blue and white uniforms and spent vacations in camps at the Baltic seashore. After the Soviet troops came to Latvia <sup>5</sup> father burned my Betar uniform [in the USSR all Jewish organization were forbidden].

We didn't do any housework – we didn't even wash a cup. My mother only demanded that we washed our panties and stockings and darned our stockings. I had many expensive clothes. Before going to bed I took off my clothing and threw it on an armchair beside my bed. Sometimes there were heaps of clothes on the armchair. After finishing the 7th form at secondary school I went to the 8th form in grammar school. Only professors could teach in grammar school since there was a requirement that one needed to have the title of professor to work at grammar school. We had a wonderful teacher of history; he was German and his name was Letz. I remember him and his classes and I even helped my grandchildren with their homework in history.

When my sister was in the 9th form she fell in love and told father that she wanted to get married and if she is not allowed to do so she would leave home. My father got so angry that he even hit her, but he calmed down promptly and found a compromise. Father demanded that my sister finished the 9th form and took a course in accounting. She also worked as a cashier in his store. She worked another year before she got married. Her husband Efraim Kann was 24. He had served in the army by that time and was a shop assistant in a car shop. This job enabled him to provide for the family.

They had a traditional Jewish wedding and a wedding party at our home and in the apartment of our neighbors, a Jewish family, on the same floor where we lived.

There were Jewish cooks that made food for the wedding and mother and Manya was their supervisor. They made plenty of food. I remember the wedding very well. At the beginning Efraim, the rabbi and other men got together and talked in whisper about something. I guess, they were talking about the contract. Then my sister came out in her long white gown escorted by six friends wearing fancy dresses. She was sitting at a low table for gifts in the corner. Then the bridegroom came. He was wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. Then the rabbi came and a chuppah was installed. The rabbi said a prayer. Then my sister's friends and mother took my sister round the bridegroom several times. Then the rabbi gave the bride and bridegroom a glass of wine. They sipped some wine and broke the glass. Then everybody danced traditional Jewish dances. I remember Horah. There was a group of violinists playing. The wedding was beautiful and ceremonious.

My parents made a generous gift to the newly weds. They rented an apartment and furnished it richly. Rebecca didn't work after she got married. Soon she gave birth to a girl, Atara. My sister was a housewife and had a baby and was tied to her home. She was only 18 and she felt as if she were in prison. She wanted more freedom and entertainment. Her friends came to see her. They had coffee, played cards and socialized. Once she went to a coffee shop with a friend of hers and I stayed with the baby. Her husband got to know about it and they had an argument. On the following day he submitted his application for a divorce without going into detail of what happened. He got a divorce immediately and my sister returned to her parents' home. He was very sorry for what he had done. He often came to dinners and stayed overnight in our house. They were going to remarry, but this was not to happen. In 1940 Efraim got a job of a driver for a Soviet official. He perished at the very beginning of the war.

## **Soviet Invasion of Latvia and Exile to Siberia**

When in 1940 Soviet troops came to Latvia my father said 'That's it, friends, life is over'. This was true. Soviet authorities allowed only to have a small apartment with standard 4 square meters per person. We were looking for a small apartment, but it was not an easy mission. We found a 3-room apartment that was still way too big. We let the family of director of school move in with us. Soviet authorities demanded that father paid taxes for the store and when father showed them confirmation that he had paid all taxes they said 'You've paid to Latvians and now you will pay the Soviet authorities'. My father didn't have any cash since his money was in circulation. We sold our chandelier, carpets and many other things from home to pay this tax, but we didn't get sufficient amount. The store was confiscated and my parents lost their job. I went to study in an evening school since I had to look for a job. We were having a hard time, but the hardest time was ahead of us. One night in 1941 two NKVD [6](#) officers came to our home to declare that we were to be deported. My father was just an exploiter for Soviet officials that made his living exploiting hard work of shop assistants and other employees.

On 14 June 1941 my mother and I were deported to Siberia and my father was sent to a concentration camp. This was the hardest day in my life. This was the last time I saw my sister and my father. My father went to a camp by train on that day. I was searching for him for a long while later. I wrote requests to NKVD and to all camps, but they responded that they didn't have any information about him. I heard about my father from the father of my school friend Esia Kaplan. Her father was in the same camp where my father was. He survived. After he was released he found me and said that my father was sent to Perm region near Solikamsk town [2 300 kms to the northeast from Odessa]. The camp was at the wood cutting facility. My father lived there in the camp for over a year. He worked at the wood cutting facility for a year and then fell ill. He had kidney problems. He died either of starvation or disease in December 1942.

My sister Rebecca and her daughter Atara perished in the ghetto in Riga. Germans exterminated children and then shot women in the Forest Part. Rebecca was praying constantly begging for the Lord to take her to Him. My friend Esia Kaplan told me about it. Esia was taken as slave to Belgium. She survived the war. My relatives are buried in the area that is called the Forest park. Many years later some wealthy Americans installed a memorial that I take as a monument to my relatives that had perished.

My mother and I were put on a train with barred windows. There were plank beds covered with straw. There was a convoy guard in each railcar. We traveled for about months. On 22 June the Great Patriotic War began when we were on the train. Our guard was a kind young soldier that allowed us to get off at stops to get some water and even allowed to open windows. My friends Betia Serebro that was older and smarter than I offered me to run away, but I couldn't leave mother. Betia got off at a stop and the guard didn't notice that she vanished. Betia joined a group of refugees. She explained that she had left her documents at home and her house was ruined. She survived and resides in Israel. I communicate with her on the phone.

My mother didn't speak from the moment we parted with my sister and father at the railway station. She didn't eat or sleep. She only moaned quietly. I was afraid she was losing her mind. Other women cried loudly, hit their head on the wall while my mother sat quietly staring at one spot. We were taken to Taseevo village in Krasnoyarsk region, Siberia, [4 400 kms to the northeast

from Odessa]. We stayed there for 9 months. I didn't work at the beginning, but then I went to the local NKVD office asking them to provide employment to me. They sent me to work on the bank of the river where I had to cut planks from logs. To do this work one didn't need any education. I believe in God and I think He gave me such character that enabled me to not be afraid of any work. I did any manual work in Siberia, even though I didn't do any physical work at home.

At first we were renting a room with two Latvian women that were sent in exile for being the wives of policemen. In sometime we moved into a room with a nice Jewish woman that had two children: a boy and a girl. I don't remember the girl's name, but she taught me to alter clothes, since the clothes we had with us did seem out of place. The boy - Ziama taught me to read and write in Russian. My mother felt miserable. She heard that Germans were exterminating Jews and she understood that she would never see her dear ones again. In 9 months we were sent to the collective farm located near Taseevo, but there was no work for me there. I was called by authorities that said that I might be employed by a fishing crew in the Far North. When I heard that I had to go there alone leaving my mother I refused. It sometimes occurs to me that I must have had the will of steel to calmly reply to NKVD officers 'Even if you kill me I won't go without mother'.

In spring 1942 my mother and I were sent to Eniseysk station. I signed a document obliging me to do my mother's portion of work as well. My mother was 55, but she turned into an old and sick woman. We lived in the street at this station for about a month. We were lucky that it was warm at this time in April and May. We were kept as if we were evil criminals. We were convoyed even to the toilet or canteen. Later we were put on a boat sailing up the river to the north. I don't remember what river it was. Groups of 20-30 people were left on the banks of the river where there were no settlements whatsoever. When we got off the boat we excavated a mud-hut. I understood in exile that a human being could get used to any condition and that there was little one needed in life. I realized that time deadened any feelings. In 14 years in exile I learned to look at things from a different standpoint. I found out that a mud-hut was much better than a barrack for 40-50 people. I learned to make mud-houses and they were not too bad. I could make a table, a bed or a stool. In 14 years we were moved to other locations 13 times. I cannot even list all areas where we lived. There was a taiga around, there were rivers in the taiga and we moved from one location to another with our miserable belongings. We were always guarded, but I couldn't understand why. There was no place to run.

I met many people of various nationalities in exile and in all those years I never heard the word 'zhyd' [kike]. I guess, the Soviet power had many enemies. There were people of different nationalities with us: Russian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Georgian, Azerbaidjanian. We supported each other: disaster makes people closer. People were dying like flies from starvation, hard work, typhoid and scurvy. There was an undertakers' group that had a lot of work to do.

My mother and I always identified ourselves as Jews, but observing of traditions in exile was out of the question. We were on the edge of survival. I did say the 'Shma Israel' prayer at the worst times. There were also funny moments in our life there. On the bank of the Laptay River, in 70 km from the North Sea there were Germans from Povolzhie: hardworking and very tidy people, but somewhat narrow-minded. They didn't even know that there was a nation of Jewish people. They had a Lutheran book of prayers written in Gothic script that I studied at grammar school. They asked me to read it for them on Sunday. I asked my mother whether it was all right with her and

she said that if it's for the good of these people she didn't mind. So I served as 'pastor' for some time in exile.

I hate to go back to this period of my life: life was hard and humiliating, but we came over it. Through all years in exile I was fighting with jailers that wanted to separate my mother and me. But we stayed together. I've always asked myself one and the same question: 'Did God rescue or punish me by sending in exile? Was it the matter of either perishing in a ghetto or going across Siberia in exile?' I haven't found an answer yet. In 1948 somebody told me about establishment of the state of Israel. I was happy, but only in my thoughts. At that time I couldn't share my joy with anyone, but mother.

In 1948 we were taken to Igarka town [4 000 kms to the northeast of Odessa] to work at a timber facility. It was a picturesque spot on the bank of the Enisey River. In 1949 my future husband was taken there, too. Alexandr Liatun, Ukrainian, was born in Boyarka near Kiev in 1905. He left for Novosibirsk in his late teens. He studied at the Law faculty in an Institute. After he finished the third year of studies he was recruited to serve in militia. He studied at an evening department. Alexandr worked as investigation officer and then as a district prosecutor. In 1937, when the period of arrests [Great Terror] [7](#) began he tried to rescue the wife and children of one of arrested people from exile and was fired from work. In a year he was sent to a camp in the Ural. In the late 1940s after liberation he went to live with his friend in Tashkent. His friend helped him to get employed in an accounting office, but in some time Alexandr was arrested again. [At Stalin's period in USSR they practiced repeated arrests without any evident reasons.] He was kept in jail for a year and in 1949 he was sent to reside in Igarka town where he got a job as a laborer at the timber facility. We met there. We couldn't obtain a permit to get married for a long time: the authorities kept telling us that we needed a permit from Moscow. We got married in 1950 and in 1951 our daughter Tatiana was born.

### **Life After Stalin**

In 1953 Stalin died. The only thing we were sorry about was that he hadn't died 10 years before. There would have been less suffering. In 1954 after Stalin's death we received temporary identity cards and later we received passports with a note that we were convicts. My friends advised me to submit a request to have my passport reissued explaining that I had lost mine. I, my mother and my husband received another passport without the note about my being a convict. We stayed in Igarka until 1960. We were not subject to any residential restrictions any longer and could travel to any place in the country. I can't say life was too bad. You can't imagine how little a person needs to be happy. I had my beloved husband and daughter beside me. We rented a room that was our home. My husband hammered nails in the wall and hung a piece of cloth to hide our clothes hanging there: this served as a wardrobe. It was nice and convenient! I learned to make clothes. At first I learned to make men's clothes and later learned to make women's clothes as well.

In 1960 we moved to my husband's sister in the very little town of Boyarka near Kiev. There were almost no Jews there then. She had two small summerhouses near Kiev and offered us to stay in one of these houses. Alexandr agreed and we moved there. There was no electricity or heating in the house, but this could hardly discourage us after all hardships we went through. We refurbished the house, installed the heating system and the lighting. My husband got a job at the varnish-and-paint in Kiev that an acquaintance of his helped him to get. He commuted to Kiev by train every

day. He got a salary of 100 rubles. After he retired he did the housework: cleaned, washed and cooked and kept rabbits and chickens. He was very good at keeping the house since I was too busy working at a shop. My mother died in 1964. We buried her in Boyarka in a single little town cemetery. Jewish tradition was not observed then.

When I visited Riga in 1961 the town seemed empty to me. Of course, Riga is a very beautiful town, but for me it was a cemetery of the town. Walking in the town I recalled my deceased relatives, our life and my childhood. I stayed with my cousin Eta, my father's sister Mina's daughter. In 1970s Mina wrote that she was moving to Israel. It was a dream of my life to live in Israel and I was very happy for my cousin, but I was also concerned about me and about her. Before they obtained a permit to leave they made several trips to Moscow spending their time and money and every time they were told that their documents were not ready and that they had to come another time. My cousin was fired from the kindergarten where she worked as a teacher. They left without a penny. They didn't have any jewelry and they couldn't sell their apartment since it didn't belong to them. We didn't even go to see them off: my cousin was so worried that we might have problems after they left. At that time there were grounds for concern, but not as deep as during Stalin's period. They made it all right in Israel. My cousin's husband got a job of electrician at a plant and had another part-time job and my cousin worked at a store.

My daughter Tatiana studied at school in Igarka for two years and when we moved to Boyarka we sent Tatiana to a Ukrainian secondary school. She wrote her first dictation in Ukrainian with 52 mistakes, but in due time she learned Ukrainian and finished her third year at school with the highest grades. My daughter finished school with a gold medal and in 1968 she entered the Faculty of hydro acoustics at the Kiev Polytechnic institute. Tatiana was a smart girl. When studying at the institute she had training at the Kiev Scientific Research 'Hydropribor'. Upon graduation this Institute offered her a job at the closed laboratory [involved in secret developments], but in half a year the management of the institute all of a sudden got concerned about her opportunity to work at the secret laboratory considering that her father and mother were repressed and her mother was a Jew to crown it all, her grandfather died in a camp and her grandmother was repressed, too. Her management called her and offered her to write a letter of resignation. When she refused they threatened to fire her, but my daughter is as obstinate as I was and she replied 'All right, you can fire me, but I am not going to write a letter of resignation!' She was asked to see manager of department 1 that turned out to be a decent man. He explained the situation to her and asked her to write the letter of resignation, but he helped her to get another employment as senior engineer.

Our life was not too rich. We never went to have rest on holidays. Only once my husband was in sanatorium in Kobulety (Georgia). His trade-union paid for it. We had few free time, my husband kept rabbits and chickens, and I sewed at home privately. But after all we always tried to read fiction and papers. My husband was fond of poetry and so was our daughter Tatiana.

In 1976 Tatiana got married. My son-in-law Alexandr Miakushkin, Russian, was born and grew up in Odessa. He graduated from Kiev University. I always wanted our daughter to marry a Jewish man. My husband understood me and supported, he liked Jews. And Tatiana - she didn't care at all. We wanted our daughter to be happy so much that we thought 'O'K, even if she marries a Chinese man - so what?' As long as everything is quiet it will be all right with us. After they got married they settled down in Odessa. Tatiana's husband Alexandr is a very decent man. He always sympathized with Jews. In 1977 my first grandson Alexandr was born.

Time changes, but people remain the same. Through my whole life I've heard something abusive about my nationality said by the people I knew. I had a colleague. We worked together for many years and were on good terms, but she said once that if her son married a Jewish girl she would hang herself. I said 'Shall I bring you a rope – go on, hang yourself!' There were two hard events in my life. In 1981 my husband died and I felt myself very lonely. After my husband died I realized that my only rescue could be work. I took orders and made clothes at home. I wanted to earn some money to support Tatiana. I went to Odessa 5 times a year. In 1982 my granddaughter Dana was born. In 1991 my grandson Alexandr died in an accident. It seemed we were all dying with him. I can't talk about it ... In 1992 my daughter got pregnant and my third grandson Mitia was born. Tatiana and I believe that God gave back our Alexandr. Mitia is so much like him. May he be happy and live a long life. After Mitia was born I decided to move to Odessa. I sold my house and left my clients, but I sometimes doubt that I did the right thing. Young people mustn't live with their parents. My children love me and I try to help them, but such thoughts come to my head. Perhaps, I should pay less attention to some details.

My granddaughter Dana studied at a secondary school, but she kept complaining that teachers yelled at children, hit them on their hands and didn't treat Jewish children well. Dana suffered from anti-Semitism a lot. My son-in-law Alexandr was so upset about it. When the Jewish center 'Migdal' opened in Odessa children decided to send Dana there. Children studied Hebrew and Jewish traditions in Migdal. Later my son-in-law found out there was the 'Or Sameach' school [8](#) and sent Dana to the 9th form at this school. Dana had a wonderful teacher Sarah from Israel. She taught Dana to speak Hebrew in one year. My grandchildren have no problems with learning Hebrew. I think, maybe it is because when they were babies I sang Betar songs in Hebrew to them? Or is it in their blood?

In 1998 Dana went to study in Israel under the Program NAALE-16. [Educational program for Jewish pupils from the former USSR.] Dana finished a boarding school for girls in Jerusalem. She is religious: she prays, celebrates all holidays and follows the kashrut. In 2001 she got married. Her husband Aurelio Kanalis also came to study in Israel under the NAALE-16 program. He studied at the boarding school for boys. He is a religious boy: he wears a kippah and observes traditions. Before the wedding the rabbi that was to conduct the wedding ceremony checked my granddaughter's documents since her father and grandfather were Russian. He called me in Odessa and spoke Yiddish to me. Perhaps, she thought that if I answered in Yiddish he could trust the documents. Anyway, when we came to Jerusalem he looked at me and said that he had no more doubts! Finally the dream of my early youth came true: I saw Promised Land with my own eyes. I met my cousin Eta and the friends of my childhood in Riga I did not see for ages.

There were many guests at the Dana's wedding: men and women sat separately. It was a merry and beautiful wedding. I danced and danced and forgot my age. I recalled my sister Rebecca's wedding and my heart rejoiced: our family returned to the traditions of our people. In 2002 my great grandson Nataniel was born. He is a true Jew since he was circumcised on the 8th day. Aurelio's grandmother helps to raise the baby. Dana works at the post office and Aurelio is in the army. Dana wears a shawl – she is a true Jewish woman. God guard them!

My grandson Mitia studies at the Jewish school 'Or Sameach' and attends the Jewish center 'Migdal'. He wears a kippah and says that if somebody doesn't like it let them not look at him. We try to observe kashrut at home. Of course, we don't have kosher dishes nor can we afford to buy kosher

food in Odessa, but at least we don't mix meat and dairy products. At Sabbath Tatiana lights two candles and we have dinner. Mitia and his mother go to the synagogue on all holidays and my son-in-law respects this a lot. I am too weak to go to the synagogue. Volunteers from Gemilut Hessed visit me ringing food and Jewish newspapers. I believe I survived through all hardships to see my grandchildren coming back to Jewish traditions. I have a dream for my daughter to move to Israel. I wish peace for Israel. My granddaughter comforts me saying that whatever there is it will be God's will. We can only pray. May there be peace in the world! I am praying for it.

## **Glossary:**

### **1 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.

### **2 Russian Revolution of 1917**

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

### **3 Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

### **4 First Guild Merchant**

Top tier of wealthy merchants, those in international trade, doctors, university professors and similar positions. Buying a First Guild Merchants license entitled a merchant with assets of not less than 15,000 rubles, to trade in Russia and abroad, participate in banking, insurance, and corporate endeavors, and to own factories, railroads, and merchant ships. This was a ranking that passed to

your heirs. You paid 600 rubles for that license annually. An important perk of this soslovie/tax ranking was that you were exempt from Conscription.

## **5 Soviet occupation of Latvia**

In June of 1940, the Soviet Union invaded Latvia. On 5 August 1940, Latvia was incorporated as the 15th Republic of the Soviet Union. A period of terror followed as the Soviet regime attempted to weed out enemies.

## **6 NKVD**

People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Soviet Union's secret police force which operated from 1934 to 1946. They were tasked with protecting state security and eliminating alleged enemies of the state. They played an integral role in carrying out the Great Terror and in pacifying occupied regions.

## **7 The Great Terror**

Great Terror (1934-1938): During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the Party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

## **8 Or Sameach**

A yeshiva based in Jerusalem and founded in 1970. It is known as a "baal teshuva" yeshiva since it caters to Jews with little or no background in Judaism, but with an interest in studying the classic texts such as the Talmud and responsa. Students are recruited either locally or from other countries where the yeshiva has established branches, such as in the United States, Canada, South Africa, United Kingdom, Australia, Ukraine and Russia.