

# David Abramson

Born 1923

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(the Glossary is omitted here)



I was born on 10 July 1923 in Tallinn.

Before the Second World War there were about 5,000 Jews in Estonia. I believe there are only 500 people left in Estonia today of the Jewish families that lived there before the war. My father, Max Abramson was born in Tallinn in 1880. My paternal grandfather was also born in Tallinn, around 1840. All that I remember of my grandfather is his great white beard, and I remember nothing about my grandmother. It is known that the Abramson clan came to Estonia from Lithuania. My relatives on my mother's side came from Latvia, moved to Pärnu during the Revolution,<sup>1</sup> and lived there until the end of the thirties. My mother was born in 1899.

My parents were married in Tallinn at the beginning of the twenties. By the last years of the Estonian Republic my father had become a very rich man. He owned houses and businesses. He had acquired all of his wealth through steadfast, unrelenting work, ten to twenty hours a day. He stood behind the shop counter himself, went on business trips, and kept his own account books. At the end he also owned a dye workshop in Tallinn.

We lived in a very large apartment at number 4 Valli Street. For years there was a state insurance firm in that building.

Our family was of the Jewish faith. Both my father and my mother were consistent in their religious observances. Theirs was a gentle, everyday piety. Traditional Jewish dishes were prepared, such as stuffed perch—the skin of the perch is stuffed with fish that has been put through a meat grinder, and then it is baked. A very tasty dish indeed! My Estonian wife also knows how to prepare it. Pork was not eaten in our home, but when my father went to the tavern with the salesgirls, he would eat everything. On Friday nights candles were lighted in our home. My father would wear his wide-brimmed hat, and read something incomprehensible to me in Hebrew. On high religious holidays my parents attended synagogue, and I would be taken along. I stood there rather unwillingly, because there were many more entertaining things one would rather be doing.

I began my education very early. When I was five I was taken to the German elementary school, and immediately placed in the second grade. The teacher thought there would be nothing for me to do in the first grade class. A few years later I enrolled in the German *Realschule* on Luise Street. I did not go there for very long. At that time there was a state law in Estonia, according to which minorities could either attend Estonian schools or their own national schools.<sup>2</sup> My parents did not think that the Tallinn Jewish high school was academically strong enough. Besides, they did not like the fact that the director of the Jewish school had communist views. Thus I was enrolled instead in the Westholm private high school, without a doubt the best school in Tallinn at the time. Of course Treffner considered his school in Tartu to be the best in Estonia, and of the girls' schools, the Lender gymnasium considered

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<sup>1</sup> The Russian Revolution, 1917-1918.

<sup>2</sup> Schools for minorities, established under the Cultural Autonomy Law for Cultural Minorities (*Vähemusrahvuste kultuuriseadus*) in 1925;

itself in first place.<sup>3</sup> Our Westholm humanities education was superior by far to what is taught in the technical high schools of today. First, we mastered Estonian grammar, and never wrote the word *tegemata* with two t's the way some technical school graduates do today. Secondly, we studied several foreign languages: English, German (our home language, by the way), French, and in the last year of high school had a choice of Russian or Latin. We chose Latin. So we knew our languages. A good example of the fruits of this curriculum is President Lennart Meri's extensive knowledge of foreign languages. Lennart Meri was our schoolmate, my brother's classmate, in fact. During our school days he would come to our house to play ping-pong. A few years ago we met the President at the grand opening of the Kawa Plaza building. There was a large banquet on the upper floor. Meri saw me, walked briskly toward me, shook my hand, saying, "Hello, David, do you still remember me?" Of course I did, but I asked how he had recognized me. He replied that a president ought to remember such things.

I completed the 12th grade a few weeks before the war broke out. That year the 11th grade also received their diplomas, because the Soviet authorities decided they had had enough education, and took away a grade. This was the first step toward *desjatiletka*.<sup>4</sup>

During the Soviet era the name Westholm was held in contempt as the rich kids' school. Children from rich families did go there, but they were actually outnumbered by sons of recognized public figures, and there were also a good many students from very poor families. The principle at Westholm was that no one should have to interrupt their education for the lack of money. Old Westholm himself and the next director, Etverk, would assemble the parents and organize the collection of funds for the needy. There was a strong sense of solidarity at the Westholm *gymnasium*, and its alumni have always helped one another out. For example, during the first months of the war destruction battalions were formed. In our class there were two communists, Noormaa and Nigul, who joined the destruction battalion. But when those boys learned that many of their fellow graduates faced mobilization into the Russian army, they looked up their classmates, who were partying in some restaurant, and warned them to get lost. Thus the Westholm school spirit was stronger than politics. Even after fleeing Estonia former Westholm boys banded together and helped one another. My old classmates from Canada and the United States have told stories about it.

In September 1940 my father was arrested. There was nothing they could accuse him of, directly or by implication. Except for the fact that he was rich, and so it was necessary to lock him up. I was at home when they came for him. The men ripped the wallpaper down with their bayonets, looking for valuables hidden behind the walls. That was my first acquaintance with Soviet power, the beginning of my "great friendship" with it.

My father was sent to prison camp somewhere in Kazakhstan. He returned to Estonia in 1946 with one eye missing, a human wreck. He died in 1964. In reality our family has suffered a great deal more from the Russians than the Germans. Among our relatives, the Germans killed one family who had remained in Pärnu during the war, and one of my uncles, who was a doctor. But eight of my maternal relatives were tortured to death in Soviet prison camps.

Just before the war we had finished building a new house in the suburb of Kivimäe. It was located on Vabaduse Boulevard, where there is now a shop, recessed a little from the street at the Jannseni bus stop. Our house was next to the shop. It was a beautiful, modern structure. My father wanted to invest his money wisely. The furniture had already been carried in, but we were not able to live there for even a day. Some men from the Russian destruction battalion

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<sup>3</sup> Elite schools in the Estonian republic, both of which, the Treffner Gymnasium in particular, are strongly embedded in cultural history.

<sup>4</sup> *Desjatiletka* (ten year plan): Soviet concept of five- and ten-year production plans, later extended to the educational system. At the time Abramson is talking about, Estonia had 12 years of education (ending with grade 12 of high school), while in Russia there were only 10 grades.

took over the building, caroused there for a few days, and then burned it to the ground as bourgeois property.

On the 6th July 1941 we were evacuated: my mother, myself, and my younger brother Gabriel. At Lasnamäe we were put in a local railway car with benches. Our journey took three weeks. The first time we got out of the train was at Chelyabinsk. Gabriel's new bicycle, which we had dragged along from Tallinn, was stolen right in front of the railway station. We could not keep our eyes on it the whole time. Then again, we simply could not imagine that anyone would steal it.

From Chelyabinsk we were taken to the Kurgan *oblast*. We landed in some abandoned village. The overall impression was depressing—poverty, stupidity, backwardness. Luckily, we were not in that village for very long. My mother got an invitation from her brother, who was living in the city of Tjumen a few hundred kilometers away, to come and live with him. My mother's brother, Sima Goldberg, had been evacuated there from Moscow along with a factory that was manufacturing wooden propellers for Soviet aircraft. My uncle took his relatives under his wing, since as a "specialist in the war industry" he had many advantages.

My greatest wish was to find a way to continue my studies. The main obstacle was language—I knew no Russian at all. I could compare this situation with what the local Russians here in Estonia are saying today about their language problems—some of them do not want to learn Estonian, others think there is no need to know it, and still others think it is too difficult. When I began my higher education, I simply had to learn the language as quickly as possible, and I managed this in the space of two or three months. I have never formally studied Russian grammar, but I do not believe I make many mistakes in spelling.

There was no opportunity to study in Tjumen, so I went to Novosibirsk, where there was an institution of higher learning, the Railway Engineers' Institute, that exempted one from military service. Of course I could not demand that Estonian be made the second national language at Novosibirsk. I simply had to speak Russian—and I passed the entrance examinations.

There were only three people from Estonia in that city: myself, Hilda Vares, and her mother. Hilda's father was the brother of Dr. Johannes Vares-Barbarus, her mother, Maria Davidovna, was a Jew. We visited each other frequently. Later Hilda Vares lived in Estonia for a while, and after that in Leningrad. She was married to a Russian officer.

What did I live on while at university? The wartime university was really more of a work-camp. We would be sent to the *kolkhozes* to harvest potatoes and grain, and other such work, but we earned no money for it. It did teach you something, though. I had a driver's license, which I had received just before the war. Since my father owned an automobile, I had done some driving as well. The family I lived with in Novosibirsk was very kind. They gave me a room to share with another university student. When they learned that I could drive, they helped me find a job quickly. Overall I have to say that when you relate to Russians on a personal level, they are very good and friendly people. Gathered together in larger numbers, they become impossible.

At that time in Novosibirsk, a person with a driver's license was about as extraordinary as an astronaut in today's terms. I got an evening job distributing vodka at the local distillery. When it came to vodka there were two prices: the state price and the free market price. The ratio was about 1:500. I was not paid any wages, but at the end of every workday I was officially permitted to buy one bottle of vodka at the state price. For two bottles of vodka one could get a kilo of butter, chrome leather boots, a suit, etc. The price ratios were turned upside down.

I worked with a "GAZ AI-AI" automobile, the engine ran on wood gas. In the trunk was a stove heated with wood blocks. Every week I was also given a bottle of gasoline to warm up the engine. So I rattled along and lived quite well, considering, of course, that this was a time when

many people were experiencing abject starvation. A driver's license does not mean much today, but in those days it saved my life.

In the fall we were shipped by riverboat from Novosibirsk up the Ob River to work in remote *kolkhozes*. We lived in a farmhouse, which was kept painfully clean on the inside. The unpainted wood floor was scrubbed with sand every other day until it was white. But the weather had already gotten very cold. The locals would pull up fence posts and burn them for fuel in the stove. This may seem strange, since the village was surrounded by a thick forest. The truth was, no one had bothered to chop any wood during the summer. Apparently they would make new fence posts every summer and the next winter burn them in the stove again. That was the way of life.

The rampant anti-Semitism I saw in Novosibirsk was an unpleasant experience. I had never experienced anything like it, nor have since. The Westholm high school had instilled in me an understanding of the equal worth of all peoples. There were only a few Jewish students at Westholm, but we had no problems at all there. I remember that one of the students used a derogatory word for Russians, *tibla*. Director Ever made a big deal of it—he had no tolerance for ethnic hostility or disparaging attitudes. But in Novosibirsk anti-Semitism was considered almost stylish.

In the summer of 1944 I was drafted from the Institute into the army. I had almost completed my schooling. During the war, the period of study was shortened to four years, and all I had left was to get my diploma. I was sent to Omsk to a reserve battalion for basic training. It was a time of famine. As soon as we got to the front conditions improved. I was a private in a Russian battalion, and my war journey took me from Byelorussia to Lithuania and from there to East Prussia. I was in the guard patrol for staff headquarters and due to my guard duties I never participated in actual battles. In the army I had no difficulties due to my Jewish nationality. In the military true ethnic animosity cannot really exist: in the tumult of war no one can ever know for sure where the bullet comes from. Men who have been in the German army say the same thing. On the front lines there cannot be any mutual hostility on that level.

Today there is a great deal of polemic going on as to who was on the right side in the war, who on the wrong side. As if those men who fought in the Estonian Legion were on the right side, heroes, all of them, but those who fought in the Estonian Infantry Corps,<sup>5</sup> were doing the wrong thing. That is all nonsense. No Estonian man who fought against the Germans could even imagine that they were fighting for the cause of establishing Soviet power in Estonia. Everyone wanted Estonia to be a free country. Some wanted to liberate Estonia from the Germans, others from the Russians. And the destruction carried out by the Germans was no small matter, either. Even I could not imagine that Russians would remain in Estonia and occupy us for another fifty years. To blame the Estonian Infantry Corps for helping bring about the occupation of Estonia is the grossest injustice. I am not talking about the commissars and the communists; I am talking about the majority.

For me, peace came at Königsberg. But for our division the war was not over. In a long troop train we were hauled through all of Russia to the Far East, to the Chinese border to face the Japanese. That campaign was like a military parade. Those battle-tested units of the Soviet Army that arrived there were simply not able to seize the territory as quickly as the Japanese units surrendered them. We advanced at the speed with which water, gasoline, and ammunition could be hauled to supply the troops.

I was fortunate enough to make it to Port Arthur. I was of course in demand everywhere, because I could translate. Then came the decree that men with higher education were to be demobilized at a faster rate, and I travelled that long, long way back to Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> The Estonian Corps was composed of Estonians mobilized into the Russian Army.

In Estonia I was reunited with my mother and brother, who had arrived ahead of me, but my father was still in prison. My earthly possessions consisted of a soldier's overcoat, a *gimnastjorka* and a pair of trousers.<sup>6</sup> At that time Hendrikson was mayor of Tallinn. I paid him a visit and got a requisition form with which to buy a pair of pants, a shirt, and a coat. That was how my peacetime life began.

Before the war I had had a childhood romance with a Jewish girl. After the war we met again, dated for a while, but then I had to leave. In the meantime the girl had married a businessman of Jewish extraction from Riga, who was then imprisoned for a long time. Our love was ended by my departure to foreign parts: it so happened that I was sent to Germany. In Potsdam there was a commission composed of four nations—the USA, the Soviet Union, Britain, and France—that was to divide up the ships that had belonged to Germany and distribute them as war trophies among harbours around the world. I was transferred to that commission, as a member of the Soviet delegation. A large, elegant villa had been designated for us in a Lübeck suburb, and there the experts carried out their task of locating and acquiring the floating docks, tugboats, passenger liners and freighters reserved for the Russians, and arranging for their transportation to Russian harbours. My role there was somewhat undefined—I translated, made arrangements in various offices, procured food provisions from the British, supervised service personnel, etc.

I spent over a year in Germany. It was a very interesting time. We made trips to London, Amsterdam, Belgium, Finland, and six or seven times to Sweden to receive the ships. While people in Germany were living in half-starvation, we were at God's own banquet table. To those foreign delegations who came to transfer ships, black caviar was served, as well as some of the finest appetizers, not to speak of expensive liquor.

When I returned to Tallinn, I worked in the Food Industry Trade Union as secretary to the committee on the republic level. That job did not last particularly long. Then a period of time began in which all of my jobs ended the same way, with the discovery that I was the son of a wealthy businessman.

When my trade union career ended, my next position was as director of the payroll department in the Fisheries Ministry. The minister himself, Karl Raud, was a very wise old man. The most important event connected with that job was that I found myself a wife. We lived together for two years and then divorced. I was fired from the Ministry, as it was the custom to say then, because of my father's wealth. I had been hired with enthusiasm—I had been in the military, studied in Novosibirsk and had not lived in Estonia under the German occupation.

Everything fit. I had never concealed anything about my past, but the fact that my father had been the owner of large businesses was always discovered "suddenly," as it were. My third job was in the Ministry of the Chemical Industry. They let me work there for half a year. However, once again Minister Neiman soon felt that the sons of former business owners were not a proper fit for a Soviet institution. I went to work in Tartu in the Fisheries Industry Trust, and that lasted for some years, until it turned out again that I did not fit. One of the deputy ministers of the Fisheries Industry, Varnavski, went to work in the Party Central Committee. From there he sent a letter to Tartu saying that Abramson, son of an owner of large businesses was unsuitable for a position of leadership, that he was to be removed without delay, and fired from the fisheries industry. Of course there was no employment law or workers' rights at that time. Get a move on, and that was it. But times were changing, and *anketas*<sup>7</sup> were starting to go out of fashion. For some years I was left to work in peace as the director of the Wages Department in the Maardu Chemical plant.

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<sup>6</sup> *Gimnastjorka*. uniform shirt, used both for the military or school uniform.

<sup>7</sup> *Anketa*, personnel record, which included information about family and political background.

On 8 March, 1960—I remember it exactly, because it was on International Women's Day—I started working at the Tallinn Metal Products Industry, which some time later became the production group "Vasar." I was a lead worker in a variety of capacities. "Vasar" was a well-functioning establishment. Its productivity could have been much higher, if it had not been directed by the rather stupid local Industrial Ministry, which became all but oppressive in the time of Minister Jürgens. I was there almost thirty years until the year 1989.

Then came the Estonian Republic, and with it, privatization. A group of people from our factory decided to privatize the Tartu Aluminium Factory (at that time it was referred to as Plant Number Five of "Vasar"). We operated successfully for five years. Then the factory building was repossessed by its rightful owner and we had to end production. I am firmly convinced that big mistakes were made in the reclaiming of industrial properties. Buildings of well-functioning enterprises should never have been returned to their original owners or their heirs. If people had been robbed of anything, they should have gotten monetary compensation. Under my very eyes a respectable factory became unproductive; thirty people lost their jobs, and plans for development were brought to a standstill. It would have been much more just if the owner had been compensated from the profits of the enterprise, which was functioning successfully in the buildings of the former owner. That way the growth of our industry would have continued.

Our family was compensated for a part of my father's fortune. The house at 24 Viru Street was returned to us, the one where the McDonald's is located today. There were no legal ambiguities concerning the return transaction. My brother and I were direct heirs of my father, not "the second cousins of the cow's second cousin."<sup>8</sup> But the municipal authorities were very quick to push us aside in order to start earning money themselves. It is permissible to be greedy for money, but not in an ugly way, at others' expense.

In the meantime I had met my present wife, Helju, in the production group "Vasar." She had just graduated in economics from Tartu University. The apartment situation had us worried, as there was simply nowhere to live. I even started to ponder the idea of resettlement in Israel. I had grown up Estonian-minded and speaking Estonian. School, friends, and family were all tied to Estonia. But I was very angry that I was not given an apartment. I wrote a long letter to Arnold Veimer, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers. The subject of the letter was why living quarters were given to immigrants from Byelorussia and whomever else, but not to me and to others who had lived in Estonia for generations, many of whom had had to struggle along for decades in some kind of barracks. The letter was six pages long, and there was a big scandal. The Central Committee and the KGB were informed, but no apparent official institutional consequences followed.

In those days it was easy for Jews to leave. Israel did not interest me very much, though; I would have gone right to America, where I would not even have had a language barrier. We had many friends abroad. We submitted our papers as a family, but what we were most afraid of happened—I was not granted an exit visa. The official reason given was that since the war between Israel and Egypt had just begun, the life of a Soviet citizen could not be put in danger. A very humane standpoint, I must say.

Fortunately, I finally got an apartment. We are still living in the high-rise in Mustamäe where we have been for thirty years now.

And that is my whole story. I have a son from my first marriage. His name is Sven Andresoo, after his mother. He is a track and field coach. I have two grandsons and one granddaughter. My wife's son from her first marriage has grown up in our family. He is a doctor in Rakvere. I myself think of myself as rather young. After all, a person is as young or as old as he feels.

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<sup>8</sup> Popular Estonian saying for far-fetched relations of kinship.