

## MARGARITA KAMIYENOVSKAYA

(1917-2009)



**Interviewer:** Ella Levitskaya

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**Comments from the original article are omitted here.**

The chairwoman of the Jewish Community of Estonia, Tsilya Laud, introduced me to Margarita Kamiyenovskaya. Her family had been friends with Margarita's before Tsilya was born. They have almost kin relations. Margarita lives by herself in a one-room apartment in the central district of the city. An abundance of books is the first thing you see in her apartment. Most of them are in German, English and French. Margarita has been an avid reader since childhood. She still reads a lot. Margarita is a remarkable woman. She is petite, slim and has an excellent posture. Her gray cropped hair is well done. She smiles often and her smile is charming. She is very benevolent and wins you over at once. It took me only a couple of minutes to get the feeling that I had known her all my life. Margarita has a great sense of humor and we often laughed during our conversation. In spite of a long and hard life, Margarita has managed to preserve the feeling of being young and optimistic. This woman is worth being admired.

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## Family background



**Mother - Dvosja Shuman (Shor)**  
**(1890-1982)**



**Father - Movsha (Morits) Shuman**  
**(1883-1947)**

My father's parents were born in Tallinn. I don't know when my paternal grandparents were born. The only thing I can say about my grandmother is that her name was Chava and that she was a housewife. My grandmother died before I was born. There is nothing I know about her kin. My grandfather Shmoul-David Shouman had a small two-storied house. He leased two or three rooms in the house. It was the main income of the family. My grandfather had a brother. I don't know his first name, but his last name was Shouman as well. He lived with his wife in Tartu [about 170km from Tallinn]. He was very religious. He sacredly observed all Jewish traditions, and the kashrut.

There were four children in the family. The eldest was Anna, Jewish name Chana. The second was Sarah. My father's third sister was Marzi, but her nickname was Masha. My father was the youngest, the long-awaited son. He was born on 16th January 1883. In accordance with the certificate, issued by the town rabbi, he went through the circumcision rite on the eighth day after he was born and was given the name Movshe-Shlem. His father had initially named him Morits.

According to my father, my grandparents were religious. They went to the synagogue on Sabbath and Jewish holidays. They observed the kashrut and marked holidays at home. They must have tried raising their children to be religious. My father got some sort of religious education in his childhood. He diverged from religion when he was an adult.

Out of the three sisters, only Anna was married. Her husband's name was Soskin. She became a widow at a rather young age and didn't re-marry. She had no children. I remember her being a widow. Sarah and Marzi remained single. Both of them obtained education and worked. Sarah finished obstetrician courses and worked as an obstetrician in a Jewish town hospital. Marzi graduated from the Medical Department of Tartu University and worked as a therapist.

My grandfather made sure that his children got a good education. My father went to Revelskaya lyceum and studied there for ten years. Upon graduation Father left for Germany and entered a university in Geiselberg<sup>1</sup>. He studied there and obtained his degree of Doctor of Medicine. After that he was on probation for two years at the university clinic. Then he went back to Estonia, but he wasn't entitled to work on the territory of the Russian empire with a degree from Geiselberg University. He had to sit for some exams in a Russian university to confirm his doctor's degree. He left for Tartu. It was called Yuriev at that time. He stayed at his grandfather's brother's place. My father started getting ready for the exams in all the subjects taught at the medical faculty of the university. He passed all the exams and in 1911 he was reinstated the title of a doctor at the medical faculty of the Emperor's Yuriev University.

My mother was from Kiev. I never met my maternal grandparents. I know their names from my mother's birth certificate, which unfortunately isn't preserved. It was written there that her father, Shoulim Shor, born in Pereyaslov, and her mother Rivka, nee Golberg, were the parents of the daughter born on 6th September 1890 and named Dvosya. My mother was the only daughter. My grandmother died when my mother was little, and my grandfather got married again when the customary mourning period was over. He had another daughter in the second marriage. I don't remember her name.

My mother went to a private Realschule in Kiev. She did well and finished a full course there. This is all I know about my mother's childhood. Her family lived in Kiev. She told me about the Jewish, which had taken place in Ukraine before the revolution

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<sup>1</sup> Probably Heidelberg university {M.R.}

and during the Civil War. Once my maternal grandfather was chased by pogrom-makers. He barely reached his friend's house. He even lost his rubber boots on the way. He spent the night at his friend's place after having called home. There were a lot of Jews in that district. There was a military unit in the vicinity. The Jews collected money and paid the soldiers monthly so that they maintained order. After that no pogroms took place in that district.

## **Growing up**

During World War I, my father was a battalion doctor in the tsarist army. His unit was positioned in Kiev for a while. He met my mother somehow and they got married in Kiev on 22nd October 1915. They must have had a traditional Jewish wedding as my mother's parents were religious. When the unit, where my father served, was transferred to Kharkov [440km from Kiev], my mother left with him. I was born in Kharkov on 28th July 1917. I was named Margarita. I wasn't given a Jewish name. When I turned one, my father was demobilized and my parents moved to Tallinn. I don't remember where our family lived upon our arrival in Tallinn. My parents didn't stay together for a long time. Shortly after moving to Tallinn, my father was drafted into the army again.

In late 1918 the Estonian War of Liberation was unleashed and my father was drafted into the Estonian People's Army. The Estonian army fought with the Estonian communists, who were supported by the Red Army. In 1919 Estonia was attacked by German troops and they had to struggle against them. My father was a combat doctor and he took part in the battles. In 1920 Russia recognized Estonia as an independent state. The period of the First Estonian Republic commenced. My father told me about his military service. He was a battalion doctor and saved many lives. The soldiers gave him a large silver glass-holder with an engraving. He told me funny stories about what had happened to him during his service. Once, their unit had stayed at some station for a long time. There were no toilets and the soldiers had to relieve themselves wherever they could. The entire territory was contaminated. My father submitted a report to the battalion commander who gave an order to build a toilet. It was a long wooden barrack with a huge pit with wooden planking with 25 holes. When it was ready, my father and the commander looked at it admiringly. A soldier was passing by, whistled approvingly and looking at the toilet squatted nearby.

My father was demobilized and he came back home. My parents rented an apartment in the center of Tallinn. A Jew, Berkovich, was the landlord.

My father worked as a doctor for an insurance company, which was involved in insurance and medical services for the marines and port workers. Besides that, he had a private practice. He had an office at home and received patients there. There was a law in the period of the First Estonian Republic regarding medicine: no doctor was entitled to refuse a patient for medical assistance. If a doctor was called during an accident, he was supposed to render assistance whether the patient was able to pay or not. We lived in the vicinity of the Tallinn port and my father was often called to the harbor at night. It was a very dangerous district. He had a permit from the police to keep a gun in case he had to go to the port as per night call. He never used it. My father said that there were fishy people who appeared in the darkness. They came up and encircled him. Then he heard somebody whisper, 'Don't touch him, he's a doctor', and those people left.

I should say that there was an apple-pie order in prewar Estonia. Police took efforts to maintain the order. There was a policeman on every corner and each of them was on vigil and did his best to make sure that nothing bad happened on his site. If something came up, they would run to the place of the incident. People respected the policemen and appreciated their work.

At that time the Jewish youth was actively getting ready to leave for Palestine. There were Zionist youth organizations, which nurtured future settlers for Palestine and taught them the necessary professions. But the quota for immigration to Palestine from Estonia was inconsiderable at that time and many people who wished to build the new state didn't manage to get there. Since my father was a port doctor, he knew all the captains very well. Many Jewish guys who wanted to leave for Palestine were hired as sailors with the help of my father and their dream to reach Palestine came true.



Even in the tsarist times in Estonia there was no five percent quota for the Jewish students, which was enforced throughout the Russian empire. That is why a large number of Jews went to Tartu to study at the university there. I remember, once I was on an excursion at Tartu University and the following was written in German on a cell wall, 'I sat here for teasing a Jewish student Kan.' It was proof that even in tsarist times anti-Semitism was persecuted in Estonia. There was a Judaic department in Tartu University at that time. Of course, I can't say that there was no anti-Semitism in the period of the Estonian Republic. I think it has always been in all countries at all times and will always be there while Jews are alive.

It was true that there was no official state anti-Semitism during Estonian times. There has never been a Pale of Settlement in Estonia, there was no such notion as a shtetl, a small place. Jews were free to settle in any place they wished. Jews mostly settled in big cities such as Tallinn and Tartu. The only restriction for the Jewish youth was to study in military schools. There was a lot of Jewish intelligentsia. Many enterprises, stores and restaurants belonged to Jews. They gained even more rights in 1926 when the Jewish Culture Autonomy was established as per resolution of the Estonian government. The Jewish Culture Autonomy ruled Jewish life in the country. There were numerous Jewish organizations. There was a students' fund which had been organized by Tartu University where poor students received donations from rich Jewish families to fund their studies. There were students' corporations. The Jewish theater was open as well as Jewish schools and lyceums.

My father was the only one who worked in our family. My mother was a housewife. She took care of me and the household. I was an only child. At first, my mother did all the chores by herself, but she was rather feeble. When my father started making good money, he hired a maid.

I had been bilingual since childhood. My father always spoke German to me and my mother spoke Russian. So, it's hard for me to say which of these languages I consider to be my native. Both of those languages were my first. Of course, soon I became fluent in Estonian living in an Estonian environment and playing with Estonian children. Nobody spoke Yiddish at home.

I can't say that my parents were religious. Some Jewish traditions were definitely observed. My father always contributed money to charity. Though rarely, my father did go to the synagogue. I don't know on which days. It seems to me that my mother didn't

go to the synagogue except on Yom Kippur. It was the only holiday we always marked at home the way it was supposed to be. We conducted the kapores rite, but we didn't do it with a living hen, but with money. Then we took that money to the synagogue for indigent people. We obligatorily fasted all day long on Yom-Kippur in accordance with the tradition. I still fast on Yom-Kippur. On Yom Kippur my parents used to spend almost the whole day in the synagogue. I also went to the synagogue on that day, but not for the whole day. At home dishes of Jewish cuisine were cooked, such as chicken broth, and gefilte fish. We had matzah on Pesach, we didn't eat bread. We didn't mark any other Jewish holidays at home.

The chief rabbi of Estonia, Aba Gomer, lived on the ground floor of our house. He was a very intelligent and well-bred man, a doctor of philosophy of Bonn University. Every Saturday Doctor Gomer invited to his place children who studied at Jewish schools. He told them the history of the Jewish people and after the classes his wife treated all the children to tea and a scrumptious pie. Those Sabbath classes at Dr. Gomer's place were very interesting. On Jewish holidays, he invited all the representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia and their families, who rarely visited the synagogue, to his home. We marked all the holidays at his house. I remember Pesach best of all. We always went to Dr. Gomer's house on pascal seder. He conducted it with all rites being observed. There were goblets with wine for each guest and one for the prophet Elijah. There were ten traditional pascal dishes. When he read a prayer, he always told us the story behind it and the meaning of it. I vividly remember all of it. When Tallinn was occupied by fascists in 1941 Dr. Gomer refused to evacuate. He said he had no right to leave while at least one Jew remained in the city. When we came back from evacuation, we were told that the Germans had taunted and then finally murdered him.

When I turned eight, my parents sent me to the German girls' lyceum. It was considered to be the best in Tallinn in terms of education. Not only children of Germans went there, but also many Estonians and Jews. The tuition fee was rather high. It was mandatory to wear the uniform consisting of a navy blue jacket, skirt, and beret with three white stripes. We also wore a lyceum badge on the chest.

Teaching was in German. It wasn't hard for me as I had been speaking German with my father since childhood. Estonian, English and French were taught at the lyceum. We were taught so well that even when I went on vacation to Paris for a couple of weeks

and told people that I had to be off to work, they thought that I was about to leave France to go on vacation, they didn't believe that I wasn't French.

I was the only Jew in my class. I was friends with a Jewish girl, Anita, who studied in the parallel group. My other friends were two Estonian girls and one Swedish girl. I wasn't friends with the Germans.

Even though I went to a German lyceum, my class teacher always used to tell me on the eve of the Jewish holidays that I could stay home on the occasion of the holiday. On Yom Kippur, Anita and I went to the synagogue for half a day and then we strolled along the city. We stopped by the show windows of confectionary stores and enjoyed looking at deserts, knowing that we couldn't eat them. The next day we weren't willing to eat them either.

When in 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany, there were no changes for us in Estonia on the whole, but since that time our teachers starting saying upon entering the classroom, 'Heil Hitler!' But I can't say that they started treating me or the other Jews differently.

My father adored to go for a saunter. I accompanied him. As I grew up, our routes became longer. We went hiking throughout Estonia. We left home on Saturday and came back late Sunday. My mother didn't join us as she was delicate. My father and I spent the night in hamlets. Estonian peasants didn't cluster together in villages. Each peasant family settled on a small or large farmstead depending on the prosperity of the hosts. Whichever hamlet we came across, hospitable hosts offered us something to eat, fresh milk and to stay overnight. Estonians were good people. There were no thieves. Dwellers of Estonian hamlets didn't even lock their doors when they left the house. They just propped up the door with a broomstick which meant that the hosts weren't in. My father and I were mad about the sea. My father was an excellent swimmer and he taught me how to swim. I spent a lot of time at the seaside in summer time. There was a beach not far from our home. There were swimming courses held by an instructor. I also took those courses. I swam for seven kilometers every day. Then I hired a kayak and went across the gulf. On the way back I longed to swim, so when I was half way I jumped off the kayak and swam. Then I got back on and went back home. I also went in for water jumping. I enjoyed swimming with my father. Once, my father saved a drowning man. Apart from swimming I went skiing and did gymnastics. There was the Maccabi club, which offered a lot of sports activities. There was a wonderful gym there.

Besides Maccabi there were a lot of Jewish youth organizations in Tallinn, such as Hashomer Hatzair and Betar. I was a member of the youth organization WIZO. It was a ladies' Zionist organization with an affiliate for the youth. The main task of WIZO was to propagate the Zionist movement as a liberation movement of the Jewish people, i.e. giving up being a slave and becoming a valuable Israeli citizen. Another very important goal was the prosperity of Israel. Money was collected for Palestine. It was allocated to the construction of houses, kindergartens, aid for the wounded. Of course, one of WIZO's tasks was to take care of elderly people. WIZO volunteers visited elderly people, took food to them, cleaned their apartments, and read out loud to them. The Jewish community did a lot for those people as well, but WIZO made its contribution as well. Even now, going back to the past, I realize how much WIZO had done in order for us to become kind and sympathetic people, willing to help those who are needy without being asked and convinced. We were taught those things at WIZO.

I remember one Estonian journalist, whose name I don't remember, who was a terrible anti-Semite. Almost all of his articles contained some infamous things about Jews. Then he went to Palestine and changed completely afterwards. His articles on Palestine were full of admiration and he never wrote anything bad about Jews after that.

I finished a full course at the lyceum, eleven grades, in 1936. My parents decided that I should take some time off after schooling. First I went on a voyage to Sweden. Then my friend and I went to Finland. I think the Olympic Games were being held at that time. During Estonian times the round trip to Finland cost five kronas. It's difficult for me to convert it into any modern currency; all I can say is that I could buy two kilograms of butter now with the amount I paid for the trip. A foreign passport wasn't required. We just had to pay one krona for the certificate at the police station. My friend and I arrived in Helsinki and had problems with accommodation. There were no rooms available at the hotels. We spent one night on the ship we had traveled on, and the next day we were about to go back home when we were discussing that problem, a lady came up to us and suggested that we stay at her place. This Finnish lady took us to her place and said that we would stay there by ourselves as she moved to the village during the summer. She added if we were to leave before her return, we should leave the money and keys on the table. I'm telling you this story to emphasize that it was natural for people to trust each other.

Upon my return to Tallinn, I started looking for a job. I was told that in some enterprise there was an open position of a clerk, proficient in foreign languages. We were taught clerical work and foreign languages at school. Thus, I went there, but I wasn't given the job because of some lame excuse. I was hired for the same position at a Jewish firm.

The impact of fascism was noticeable. I spent my first vacation in Paris in the summer of 1937. On my way to France I had to change trains in Berlin [today Germany]. I had to wait for the train on the platform. SS patrols were walking on the platform. Suddenly I saw a Jew with sidelocks in a long black coat and black hat. He was probably a rabbi. Without paying attention to the SS soldiers, he went along the platform calmly and with dignity. Then he sat down on a bench. He must have been waiting for the train. I was rapt with his courage. I didn't feel comfortable in the presence of the black SS uniforms, and I didn't stand out as much as he did. Besides, I didn't know that much about the attitude of fascists towards Jews.

By the beginning of the 1930s my mother had gone to the USSR to visit her family. My grandfather had left Kiev for Moscow, where his younger daughter lived. It was hard to get a visa to the USSR. Since my father was a very good doctor and often called to the Soviet embassy to render medical assistance, the ambassador issued my mother a visa as per my father's request. I don't remember everything my mother told me about her trip. What I remember is that the first thing upon my mother's arrival was my grandfather's warning that the janitor of their house was employed by the NKVD [17], so my mother had to watch her conversation. There was another amusing case. My mother was definitely dressed in a different way from the Soviet people, who were mostly dressed very poorly. Once on a warm day, my mother took off her coat and carried it in her hand and almost every passer-by asked if she was selling it.

Following her trip to Moscow, my mother corresponded with her stepsister for a while. She had married some great either state or political leader. When the period of repressions commenced in the USSR, her sister's husband was arrested and shot and she was sent into exile. We stopped corresponding after that. I know that after the war she came back from exile, but she feared to write. Very many people were afraid at that time.

We had to move to another apartment. There was an economic recession in Estonia and the price of apartments went up considerably. A landlord wasn't entitled to raise

the lease rate for those who already lived in his house. Then Berkovich decided to evict all former dwellers to lease the vacated apartment at a more expensive rate. Some people moved out, but my father and another Estonian family living on the second floor, refused to leave. Berkovich resorted to all kinds of tricks to make us leave. First he did some repair works in front of the house: he put some boards along our house so that it would be hard to enter the building. He didn't succeed. Then he came into our kitchen and started cutting our floor as if preparing it for fixing. My father took out a pistol and told him to leave. Finally we found another place to stay and moved out.

## **During the War**

In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed between the USSR and Germany. Soviet military bases were founded in Estonia. The USSR motivated it by acerbated international environment and the necessity to protect adjacent countries from attack. At that time the Soviet military didn't communicate with the local population. Probably their commanders had forbidden them to do that. We felt the Soviet presence in 1940. At that time the parliament was dissolved and the government resigned due to numerous demonstrations of the workers demanding resignations from the government. A new government held elections and the communist party, which was previously banned, came to power. After that the government addressed a request to the Soviet Union regarding Estonia joining the USSR. This took place on 6th August 1940. Estonia became a Soviet Republic.

Many things changed in our lives. It was the first time when I saw the queues in the grocery stores. My mother, having been in the USSR and having a better picture of Soviet reality, was deterred. She said that we would have to look for a smaller apartment as they would start accommodating new- comers from the USSR. The NKVD office was in front of our house so the dwellers of the houses nearby and in front of it were evicted. My mother found a small apartment for us and we moved in there. People's property was expropriated. Enterprises, and stores were taken over and they called it nationalization. The owner was merely turned out and the management was taken over by the commissar assigned by the Soviet regime. It was scary. Every day was boding new trouble. There was no resistance as everybody was aware that nothing could be done against the military power of the USSR.

Then came the day of deportation: 14th June 1941. It was probably the darkest day in the history of Estonia. It didn't just change the fate of the people deported from Estonia, but also the destiny of the remaining Estonian Jews. The list of people to be deported was made beforehand and we found out about that only later. The car with NKVD officers went to people's houses and these people were given half an hour to pack. Then they were taken to the train station, where all arrangements were made for their departure. The men were sent to the Gulag and the women and children were exiled. Politicians, people who disapproved of the Soviet power, rich people, i.e. the owners of real estates, well-off peasants who came to prosperity by working hard, were to be exiled from Estonia. There were cases where people were exiled for no reason.

There was a Jewish family, Olivson, who lived not far from our house. They owned a small store in front of our house. They didn't have any hired employees. They did all the work by themselves to make a living. I remember that one night the NKVD stormed their apartment and took them away. It was dreadful. 10,000 people were exiled, whereas the total population of Estonia was about 1,000,000. There were mostly Estonians among the exiled, but there were also Jews, Russians and Belarussian. Nationality didn't matter. It was ideology that mattered. It can't be compared to the Holocaust, but Stalin's camps weren't much better than Hitler's. Of course, it's clear why Estonians started to hate the Russians after that. The atrocities happening in Estonia during the war, when Estonians murdered Jews, commenced on that very day. Estonians recognized fascists as liberators from Soviet oppression and strove to do anything for the Germans. They chose the lesser of two evils.

22nd June 1941 was a Sunday. It was an ordinary weekend morning, when people could stay longer in bed and then start the day. At noon Molotov's speech was broadcast on the radio, where he announced that fascists had attacked without declaring war and he added, 'Our cause is just and we will win.'

Soon the Germans started air raids. Trains heading for the rear of Russia departed from Tallinn railway station. Authorized employees of Estonia were evacuated and my father was among them as he was a doctor. Thus, our family had no choice but to leave. My father tried convincing three of his sisters to get evacuated with him, but they flatly refused. They thought that three elderly political ladies, fluent in German, had nothing to fear. If the Soviet regime didn't exile them, the Germans would do no harm to them. People say that they were murdered by the Germans in 1941, but I think they were

merely killed by Estonians. It might have happened before the Germans' arrival. There were cases like that.

We left for evacuation. We didn't know where exactly we were going. All we knew was that we were heading for the rear of Russia. Since we took the train in which high officials were, there was a luggage compartment. We were able to take only the most precious things we had. We stopped in Tatarstan [today Russia] and then we were taken to a Tartar village called Staraya Kulatka [900 km east of Moscow]. Our family was accommodated in the house of a local. We had barely settled in, when the commissar of the local NKVD showed up. I had a typewriter and of course I had taken it with me. I don't know how the commissar found out about that but he asked me questions and said that he was confiscating it as it was a means of propaganda. We were naive at that time and didn't know about omni-power, omniscience and permissiveness, enjoyed by NKVD USSR. My father wasn't scared. He told the NKVD activist that the most considerable means of propaganda was the tongue and asked whether he would cut out our tongues? My father turned him out and the commissar left embittered.

I didn't know what was in store for us, but we were lucky. There wasn't a single medical worker in the village, not even a medical assistant. On that day, the mother of the NKVD commissar got ill and he came to my father for help. After that he left us in peace. Life in Staraya Kulatka was hard. It was a Mohammedan village and we were housed in the hut of a local, Mullah. As far as I understood, in accordance with Islam any harm done by a Mohammedan to an infidel would be pleasing Allah. Thus, they treated us accordingly. We weren't mere infidels to them, we were Jews: their most malicious enemies. I remember once, Mullah decided to do us good. We lived from hand to mouth and ate only potatoes. We didn't even have bread. Our hosts were pretty prosperous. They had a lot of sheep and ate meat every day. One day there was a great Muslim holiday. I don't remember which one, but on that day Allah had to do good to everybody. Our host decided to do good to us. He said that on that day we were allowed to boil our potatoes in their meat soup. We were so hungry that we agreed to that. I remember it very vaguely.

We stayed for about half a year in Staraya Kulatka. Then we moved to a grain Sovkhoz not far from Syzran [800 km east of Moscow]. My father worked as a doctor in the Sovkhoz and I did odd jobs. In fall and summer I worked in the fields. We were given a room in the barracks where the sovkhos workers and evacuees lived. There was a loudspeaker in every room. Of course, we were naive and didn't know that the loudspeaker was used for other purposes but listening to the radio. Once, the director of the sovkhos was angry with my father and said he knew all we were talking about.

Then one of my father's patients warned him not to talk about politics in the room as there was a loudspeaker there. It was a powerful dynamic speaker and if somebody was connected to it he could hear all conversations in the room.



We stayed in the grain sovkhos for less than a year as my father was taken to Syzran. It was a miners' town. My father worked in the hospital. It was very primitive. There wasn't even a lab. My father worked in the therapeutic department and received patients. Medicine was given in the hospital as per prescription of the doctor, and the junior medical employees stole medicine. Doctors constantly checked with every patient whether they had taken their medicine. If they hadn't, it meant that it had been stolen.

The locals treated us fairly well. But the crime situation in the town was horrible. There was larceny and plunder. There was an unwritten law: if you saw a person being robbed, you had to keep silent. If you warned the victim, the gangsters might beat you black and blue or even kill you. There was another rule: if you caught a thief who was trying to rob you, you could do to him anything you liked, either beat or kill him, and nobody would interfere. The police preferred to stay away in both cases.

After we moved to Syzran, I worked in the office of the municipal health care department. Then I was mobilized to anti-aircraft defense. The command center of the anti-aircraft troops was deep in the earth and we had to stay there for 24 hours and then we could take a day off for another 24 hours. I was a telephone operator. There were two dozen phones and one operations phone connected to the observation post. Syzran was located at the Volga River, so the position in the town was semi-military.

When the German aircrafts were approaching the town, we were to report from the observation post over the operations phone. The person on duty was to stay at the table and if the phone rang, he had to pick up the receiver within a second and a half and answer the call.

There was a bunk in another corner of the room, where people on duty could lie down, but they were afraid to do so as it was impossible to reach the phone in a second and a half. Once I was very tired and took a nap. I woke up from the sound of my own voice. I was by the phone and said, 'Headquarters of the anti-aircraft defense troops. The operating orderly speaking!' There were a lot of mice in the headquarters. Once, I was at the table, wearing valenki [warm Russian felt boots], and the mice were running on my feet. After the anti-aircraft defense I was sent to nurses' courses. At that time my mother and I stayed together. My father had left as he was called to Leningrad. All Estonian doctors were called to work in Leningrad at that time. My father was transferred to Tallinn in 1944 before the war was over. We went back to Tallinn in fall 1944.

## **After the War**

We got our previous apartment back. My father regained his work. It was definitely hard at first. We starved. Products could be purchased only with food cards. We managed somehow. I worked for Vtorsyryo [The company's name originates from the words 'secondary raw materials'. The firm took scrap metal and paper litter from the citizens at dirt cheap prices and sent those materials to processing facilities]. The firm was headed by a Jew, Kamusher, and he talked me into working there. The war wasn't over and the unemployed youth was mobilized for work at the plants. I was daunted by such a prospect, so I accepted the offer to work for Vtorsyryo.

Upon our return to Tallinn we found out about the behavior of Estonians during the German occupation. There was a small grocery store on our street, where we were regular customers. The owner of the store was Estonian who ostensibly treated us nicely. When the Germans came to Tallinn, he took them to our apartment and told them that there were Jews living there. We were lucky not to have been in Tallinn at that time. My father had a marvelous painting given to him by an artist from Vienna [today Austria]. The painting was called 'Praying Jew.' When leaving for evacuation, we

hadn't taken it with us as it was rather big, so it stayed in the apartment. When we went back, we found it on the garret. It had been pierced with bayonets all over.

A very pleasant Estonian man was in charge of the storage facility at our work. He was respected at work and was elected the chairman of the comrade's court [Editor's note: In the USSR there were comrade's courts, consisting of the most respectable members of the team. Those courts were meant for minor delinquencies and violations of certain orders or standards by the employees of the enterprise. They could make an administrative penalty: deprivation of bonus, make a reprimand etc.]. His wife also worked in our office. Both of them had a good attitude towards the Jews who had returned from evacuation, and helped them. After the war there was a demonstrative trial in Tallinn, where those, who facilitated the Germans in fuselage of Jews and Estonians, were condemned.

The trial took place in the cinema building and people could get in there with special passes. My friend gave me his pass for one day and I went there. Indicated were the interrogated and the things discussed were horrifying. Suddenly I saw a familiar face on the stage. It was that pleasant Estonian, who had treated the Jews so well. During his interrogation it was found out that there was a board which processed capital punishment sentences and he was the chairman of that board. He was tried and sentenced to the Gulag. He got severely ill there. In a couple years he was released from the camp and returned to Tallinn. Of course, I went to work very worried and shared the things I had witnessed. The Estonians didn't change their opinion of that person, but the Jews, of course, took it the way I did. His wife remained at work and after that she tried to ingratiate herself with me.

I can't say that the Soviet regime was always fair at the punishment of people. My father had a good friend, a Jew. His wife came from Estonian Germans. They had two daughters, who I was friends with. That family wasn't evacuated. When the Germans came to Tallinn, my father's friend was arrested immediately and shot shortly afterwards. When Estonia was liberated, his wife and children were exiled as Germans. They were sent to a kolkhoz and given a tiny hut. It was like a den. It was hard to imagine anything of the kind. I am short, and I could easily reach the ceiling. My friends' mother met an exiled Estonian of German origin, Taube, and they got married there. Only when the daughters received their passports, where their Jewish nationality was indicated, were they able to come back to Tallinn. One of the daughters didn't return, she made a living there. She repaired her hut, planted vegetables and fruits in the

garden. I used to visit her often in summer. The place was beautiful. It was on the bank of the lake. I was able to swim there for a long time.

After the war I heard from my German lyceum alumni, who lived in Germany. Many Estonian Germans left Estonia in 1939 when Hitler called upon Germans, living out of Germany, to go back to their motherland. After the war most of my classmates came back to Tallinn. They were so tender and amiable. After being in Tallinn they founded a fund in Germany for the alumni of our lyceum and sent money from time to time. They didn't send big amounts, but still it was helpful. Only one of them is still alive. She calls me at times. She said she would come over in August. She is my age. And this is the age when people don't make long-term plans.

In 1945 I met my mother's cousin, who lived in a town outside Moscow called Cherkizovo. I was assigned the director of the production department and was sent to Cherkizovo to attend refreshing courses. I settled in the hostel. My mother gave me her cousin's address and I went to see her. She lived with two daughters. The next day she came to my hostel and took me to her place. I lived with her for two months. At that time Cherkizovo was like a village. There was not even water supply. There was a water pump in the corner and everybody went to fetch water from there. It was scary to live there. In that period of time packs of gangsters who had been released from prison, being pardoned after the war, were active. It was dangerous when it got dark. One could be robbed and killed. I went home late by tram and it was frightening to walk along the deserted streets.

The Tallinn synagogue was destroyed during the bombing of Tallinn by the Soviet aviation in March 1944. In the post-war period there was no synagogue in Tallinn. I remember, shortly after the war, Tallinn Jews started collecting money for the construction of the synagogue. They came to my father. Of course, he gave as much as he could. He said that he wasn't religious, but a Jew. Soviet authorities banned the construction of the synagogue. There was an anti-religion struggle in Estonia, which commenced in the USSR in the 1920-30s. The Jewish community created a small semi-legal prayer house. It was a small premise, where people would go and pray. My father also went there. On holidays there were many people and on Yom Kippur even those who didn't show up in the prayer house on other occasions, came to pray. After Rabbi Aba Gomer had been killed by the Germans, there was no rabbi in the community. After the war Tallinn Jews had no opportunity to maintain a rabbi and his family. There were people who applied for the position of the rabbi, but they had no rabbinical education.

They could be called rabbi conditionally. One of them was the gabbai, the elder of a religious synagogue. There was no organized Jewish life.

I got married after the war. I don't remember how I met my husband. Roubin Kamiyenovskiy was born in Tartu and graduated from Tartu University. He was a Jew. Before the Soviet regime came to power, I often attended students' dancing parties, arranged by the university. We probably met there. Later, when I went to Tartu on business trips, Roubin went to Tallinn. I can't remember how many years passed. My memory fails me now. After graduating from university, Roubin became a lawyer and worked as legal counselor. When the war was unleashed, he was drafted in the lines. With the foundation of the Estonian Rifle Corps, Roubin was transferred there. He had served in the corps until Victory Day, but in 1945 he wasn't demobilized. He was still serving in the army as a lieutenant. We got married when Roubin was in the army. We went to the marriage registration office and he said that he had to be off to the military unit on the same day. We didn't have a Jewish wedding.

My father-in-law was very pious and he didn't forgive us. Roubin's elder brother had a true Jewish wedding under a chuppah, carried out by a rabbi. My father-in-law used to say that he had only one daughter-in-law, the wife of his elder son. Only after my husband's death, at his funeral, his father said that I had been married for three years and even if I had lived with his son for 30 years, I wouldn't have been able to do more than I had done in those three years. Roubin was afflicted with quinsy. He didn't stay in bed and had a complication on the endocardium. He was sick for two years, mostly staying in hospital. It was dreadful. The conditions in the hospital are much to be deplored now, but back in that time they were simply inhuman. Then his front-line comrade was appointed the Minister of Health of Estonia. I had an appointment with him and he made arrangements for Roubin to be transferred to a governmental hospital. The conditions were much better there, but it was of no help. I was at work during the day and at night I was on duty in the hospital, staying by my husband's bed. It was scary. Roubin died in that hospital in 1951.



My father died before my husband in 1949. Before his death, my father started talking about his funeral and said that the burial service would be read by Gourevich, who had been a cantor in the Tallinn synagogue before the war. My father was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Tallinn in accordance with the Jewish rites. The funeral service was carried out by people who were applying for the position of the rabbi. My husband was buried next to my father.

In 1948 Israel became an official state. It was great news for our family. Finally, after 2000 years of exile Jews had their own state. We followed scarce messages in the papers, in case anything was mentioned on life in Israel.

All of us had Soviet passports. We were surprised that there was a section for nationality in our passports, but that made the work of HR departments and the NKVD easier. In 1948 anti-cosmopolitan campaigns commenced in the USSR. Every day we read articles in the papers about rootless cosmopolitans, who were willing to do harm to the USSR: actors, artists, scientists, writers. All of them were Jews. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was exterminated and its members were executed or exiled to the Gulag. A Jewish actor, Solomon Mikhoels, was assassinated. Estonians were indifferent to that, but those who came from the USSR, ardently condemned cosmopolitans. That campaign kindled anti-Semitism, but it wasn't done by Estonians, but by the newcomers. Then repressions commenced. In 1949 many citizens of Estonia were deported. Many of them were deported for the second time. They came from the first exile and were to be exiled again. I understood that something even more dreadful was brewing, and I was right.

In January 1953 the Doctors' Plot commenced. Of course, it wasn't as horrible in Estonia as it was in Russia. One of my colleagues had returned from Leningrad and said that when he was in the tram, the ticket-collector and some passengers were discussing what should be done with the Jews in the tram. They suggested that the Jews should be ousted from the tram, but the ticket-collector talked them out of it in a peculiar way saying that it wasn't the time. Of course, nothing of the kind happened here. Though, directors of enterprises were ordered by Moscow to fire all Jews. Sometimes people were dissolved for 'incompetence'. I was called to the HR department and was told to write a resignation letter. I did. My direct boss, an Estonian, was fired probably for 'wrong' recruitment. I was looking for a job for three months, but as soon as the HR department saw my passport, it turned out that there were no job openings. Then my former boss offered me a job as a supplier in a service company he worked for. We

collected scrap metal in the dumps and cut fir tree branches before New Year. I hoped that our life would change for the better after the Twentieth Party Congress, when Khrushchev held a speech, exposing Stalin's crimes. There were no quick changes. Only after ten years or so I got a good job. I was hired as a dispatcher in a company, dealing with timber: Lespromsbyt. Then I was in charge of the transportation department. I worked there until my retirement.

My mother and I remained by ourselves in the apartment after my father's death. In Soviet terms our apartment was too big for two people. I was called to the Ispolkom and told that half of our apartment would have to be occupied [by some other tenants] and that we would be left with two rooms. Our acquaintances, an Estonian couple, needed lodging and we gave them half of our apartment. We decided that if we had to share the apartment, it would be better to do that with people we knew. We made a big mistake. Our new neighbors started harassing us, nagging at every trifle. It happened so that my mother was afraid to go into the kitchen when I wasn't around. Before going to work I cooked lunch for my mother and left it in her room. She warmed it on a small electric oven. This went on for a long time. A new house was built in front of ours and we exchanged both our rooms for a one-room apartment in a new building. I still live there.

In the 1970s a new wave of immigrations of Jews to Israel started. I sympathized with those who had made up their minds to leave, and later I was happy for them when I found out that they had settled in well. I couldn't think of immigration for two reasons: my mother was feeble and started feeling unwell with age. She wouldn't have been able to survive the change. I was the only one she had. The other reason was that I could never stand heat. I couldn't even sunbathe on the beach.

When I turned 55 I had to resign. My mother was seriously ill by then and I couldn't leave her alone. It was impossible to live on two skimpy pension benefits. I stayed home for a couple of months and realized that both of us would starve to death. There was a telephone station by our house and I went there to work as a janitor. It was hard work for me. There were high ceilings and I had to climb the step-ladder every day to dust them. I didn't want to lose that job because it was nearby. If my mother had a fit, she called me and I ran home. It happened almost every day. Then there was a time, when I couldn't leave my mother even for an hour and I had to quit my job. It was hard. I sold my jewelry, silverware, even our silver goblets for pascal seder, and books. My mother died in 1991. There was a burial plot for my mother next to my father's grave. Before

her death she told me to have her buried over my father and leave the second empty lot for me. That was the way I did it. Of course, my mother was buried in strict accordance to the Jewish rites.

I felt very rueful after my mother's death. I remained by myself. Reading was the only thing that saved me. I always adored reading books in English, French and German. Sometimes I read in Estonian. I asked for permission to work in the library, in the foreign languages department. I worked for a couple of months for free and then I was hired and paid a salary. All employees of the library were Estonians and all of them treated me very nicely. I quit that job a long time ago, but still they come over for a visit and bring me books to read. I can't afford to buy things and it's hard for me to go to the library. They usually bring me foreign books which help me not to forget the language.

Perestroika commenced in the 1980s. Maybe for the reason that Gorbachev was younger than his predecessors he understood that the previous regime couldn't exist anymore, and the time for change had come. We really noticed daily changes at first and it made us happy. In the end, the USSR got the liberties guaranteed by the constitution, but not enforced in actuality. For the first time in so many years we were able to openly correspond with people living abroad and visit other countries. We gained the freedom of speech, in meetings, the press, and religion. There was much less anti-Semitism after perestroika. It was always been present in everyday life, but now there was no state anti-Semitism. When Gorbachev was in power the Jewish community of Estonia was officially registered. It was the first officially recognized Jewish community on the territory of the USSR. They even approved symbolism: Magen David and hexagram. It wasn't possible before as it was considered propaganda of Zionism.

In the USSR Zionism was a synonym of fascism. The Community was given the building of the former Jewish lyceum. In 1990 the Jewish community revived the ladies' Zionist organization, WIZO. Of course, in Estonia we couldn't collect money for Israel, as we didn't have such money. The women from WIZO helped sick people, visited hospitals, brought food, congratulated people on holidays, brought humanitarian help and gave it to people for free. They did what they could and the WIZO motto in many countries of the world was: if Diaspora is strong, Israel is strong. Unfortunately, mostly elderly people worked in WIZO, but they were very active. Many of them left for America, Israel, some of them went to Germany, unfortunately. I can't understand those Jews who are leaving for Germany. Even now I can't forget those things that happened

during the war and I can't forgive the Germans. I realize that those Germans who were involved in the bloodshed of Jews, aren't alive, but I can't take it out of my heart.

Then perestroika was slumping down and things became as they were. People got used to their freedom and regaining the old way of life was appalling. There was no fear of the all-mighty KGB and people started fighting for their rights. Perestroika ended up in the breakup of the USSR. I think that was really good. For us, Estonians, there was a holiday when Estonia was declared independent. We regained things lost in 1940. Our national flag with white, blue and black colors was raised on the tower again. People were crying from joy. By the way, the teacher of Estonian from the Tallinn Jewish lyceum, had kept our flag during the entire Soviet period. She was an excellent teacher. During the Soviet post-war period she was indigent and the Estonian Jews helped her out as she managed to preserve the Estonian flag because for us Jews living in Estonia, it has always been our motherland. All Estonian Jews spoke Estonian no matter what language they spoke at home. I can't understand how people could live in a country without knowing its language. I have always been surprised by Jews and Russians, who have settled in Estonia after the war and thought it unnecessary to learn Estonian. There are people, who were born here, and can't say a word in Estonian. Now they are fighting for the introduction of the Russian language. Would they have demanded that if they had gone to Germany or USA? I can't comprehend it.

Of course, when the independence was declared, life became more difficult. More than half of my pension benefit is spent on utility payments. Our Jewish community is helping me a lot. I often used to go there. I didn't just have lunch there, but I also attended concerts and lectures. All Jewish holidays are marked in the community. I was present at the pascal seder as well. The community does a great job. In 2000 the Jewish community was happy to have a rabbi. He is a young man from Israel. He came here with his wife. He does a lot for the revival of the religion, which was banned during the Soviet regime. A small synagogue has been open on the second floor of our community centre since 2000. The foundations of a new synagogue have been laid in the yard. Owing to local sponsors the community managed to restore the synagogue on the cemetery and ablution premise. Unfortunately, it's hard for me to leave home and I rarely go to the community centre. I'm always taken care of by the community. Every other day they bring lunch for me. All I have to do is to warm it. I'm visited by volunteers. They call me asking me what I need. Of course, the community provides material assistance, but what is done by my friends from the community is of no lesser importance as I don't feel bereft and lonely.