

София Беккер
Sofia Bekker



О МОЕЙ СЕМЬЕ
*
ABOUT MY FAMILY



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New York, 2004

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Sofia Bekker and family



**60 Wedding Anniversary.
Sofa and Mark
with children and grandchildren.
1997, New York.**



Inna Bakker

Книгу подготовила к печати дочь автора – доктор Инна Беккер. Эта работа заняла несколько лет; её вдохновлял пример её родителей, стремившихся всегда каждую работу выполнить наилучшим образом.

This book was compiled by the author's daughter Dr. Inna Bakker. It took her a few years to accomplish this job; the example of her parents who had always completed every job in the best possible way, inspired and helped her.

Я посвящаю издание этой книги памяти моих дорогих родителей – Софе и Марку Беккер, большой замечательной семье Беккер, которую я очень люблю, моим тетям, дядям, кузинам, племянникам, племянницам и будущим поколениям.

Я глубоко благодарна моему сыну Илюше Грозовскому, моему брату доктору Жозефу Беккеру, моему племяннику Павлу Беккеру, моим кузинам Джойс Рифкинд и Олегу Вишневетскому и моим друзьям Рону Реггев и Тане Амелиной за помощь, любовь и поддержку.

Инна Беккер

I dedicate the publishing of this book to the fond memory of my beloved parents, Sofia and Mark Bekker; to all Bekker family whom I love dearly; to my aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces as well as to future generations.

My gratitude goes to my son Ilya Grozovsky, my brother Dr. Joseph Backer, my nephew Paul Backer, my cousins Joyce Rifkind, Oleg Vishnevetski and to my friends Ron Reggev and Tanya Amelina for their help, love and support.

Inna Bakker

Author of this book - Sofia Bekker

*– Our Mama, Mamochka, Mamulya – 7.7.1913 – 6.28.1998
– loved her family very much, including the large, remarkable family of her beloved husband, our father Mark Bekker, 8.25.1908 – 1.28.2002.*

Mama wrote her memoirs, which span almost all of the 20th century, during the years 1982-1993, while she was in summer camps for senior citizens. She always spoke about her work with joy and enthusiasm, hoping that future generations of her family will know and remember the people with whom she went through life and whom she loved and respected greatly.

Our mother was an exceptional person, multi-faceted, broadly educated, professional, a very decent human being and a real lady in her manners and style and the way she related to people. She created a profoundly loving, tender and unique relationship with her husband, lasting for 61 years until her last breath.

We are blessed to have been born to such intelligent, kind, decent, interesting, educated and truly loving parents. We owe so much to them.

Our Mama lived to the age of 85 – a long and happy life in spite of all its hardships and difficulties.

She loved and was loved!

She departed life in an instant while swimming in the lake that she enjoyed so much. The most important person in her life, was beside her.

May her memory be blessed.

Daughter Inna and son Joseph

My name is Sofia Bekker. I was born in Odessa on July 7, 1913. Hereby I am about to embark on my account of my family history as well as of my own life. This will be my message to our descendants; the voice from the Past speaking into the ears of the Future. I will write down what I heard from my ancestors and relatives, as well as my own memories.

My narrative will be truthful and free of embellishments and lies. It will be a kind of a diary. I am writing at the insistence of my son, Joseph Backer (born in 1945), who is interested in our family history and likes listening to my stories.

I will start with the story of my maternal grandparents. Myself already a grandmother, I remember them fairly well. Let my grandchildren know their great-grandparents.

My mother, Gania Isaakovna Rosenfeldt (or Anna Isaakovna, as everyone called her in Russian), born in 1893 in Odessa from her parents second marriage, told me the following:

MY GRANDFATHER AND GRANDMOTHER

Mama said that my grandfather, Isaac Gurevich, married twice and had 10 children from the first marriage, but his wife died very early and children also kept dying one after the other. Mother remembered only one stepbrother who later should have also died.

Grandfather's first wife – her name is unknown – was married at 13. Her sister Velia was married at approximately the same age, but her husband was drafted to the army of Tsar Nikolas II for 25 years as a Cantonist. By Jewish law, marriages of this kind could be dissolved and a woman could marry again. This is how my grandmother Velia became the second wife of my grandfather Isaac, her late sister's spouse. Jewish laws encouraged such unions. I do not know how old they were at this point. Grandfather never disclosed his age to anyone, including his own children. He died on April 14, 1919, when, according to his eldest daughter, he was over 80. That means he was born between 1830 and 1840. I recall a tall, stately white-haired man, rough and distant, and very religious. He and grandmother Velia had 10 children. They kept dying, just like in his first marriage. I remember five daughters and two sons.

Grandfather attended synagogue twice a day and the rest of the time prayed at home unfolding his *tfilin* which I called in my childish fashion «little heels». By then he had retired, was provided for by his children and prayed day and night.

He begged only one thing from God, that his children do not die any more in his lifetime. He told God that he needed nothing else: no money, no job, nothing. And his children did stop dying. Maybe God heard him.

After the October revolution of 1917 Odessa was constantly changing hands, falling from Ghaidamaks to Petliura; from Petliura to The Ukrainian Rada; from the Ukrainian Rada to the Red Guard – and so on. Every change of power brought pogroms, executions and murders. In 1919 Odessa was taken by the Soviets, and all food immediately disappeared – even bread.

Spring came. Jewish Passover was approaching. My grandparents' children provided them with *matzos* and everything else for the Passover Seder. As always, Grandfather went to the synagogue and on his way back he saw people lining up to the street cleaner who was distributing bread. Bread – for Passover! For this deeply religious man the sight of it was like death; like a big tragedy. He then shared his *matzos* with some of the Jews. Still, it was only a drop in the ocean, and my grandfather was deeply hurt.

On the first Passover night, for the First Seder, all seven surviv-

ing siblings with husbands, wives and children came to Grandfather's house. I was almost six at that time, and I clearly remember a long table in their dining room, my grandfather with his *siddur* (a song book) at the head of the table and family all around. It was very beautiful and solemn. Grandfather kept praying and chanting Passover songs in a very soulful manner for a very long time – until late at night. Everyone felt exhausted. My mother, the bravest and liveliest of all, said – «Papa, maybe we should finish for today? It is very late». «Aye, my girl», he replied, «I am not sure that I will live to the Second Day and have a chance to pray again». He was right: when the family gathered for *Seder* again, Grandfather suddenly felt sick. His children took him by the arms, escorted to the bedroom and put to bed. He stretched out and died. This happened on April 14, 1919. He died as a holy man, without suffering. His family was around him. Now I understand that he suffered a heart attack. According to my mother, he always enjoyed good health, never was sick and never visited doctors. Apparently, it broke his heart to see Jews violate their Passover tradition. The next day black hearse drawn by black horses arrived; Grandfather in a black coffin was put on the hearse and the cart left our yard, accompanied by weeping and moaning of family members and our many neighbors. I returned to the apartment.

Upon returning from the cemetery, all his children sat down on the floor for *shiva*, while we, grandchildren, were running around in the same room. Acquaintances and relatives came in with condolences. Grandfather earned everybody's respect by his honest behavior. He never was rich. Some rich people, however, trusted him and, heeding searches by the Soviets, gave him money and jewelry to hide. When Grandfather felt that he was dying, he had just enough time to tell my mother about purses with other people's valuables hidden under his pillows. He said that they had to be returned to their owners. And they were returned. I do not know what Grandfather did in his youth or what his occupation was. I heard that he had been very learned in Talmud and Jewish history; that at the synagogue he was known as *tsadik* – a holy man who never breaks Jewish laws and preaches the word of God. Many old and smart people used to turn to him for advice or asked him to resolve their disputes.

And this is what my Grandfather was like.

*

Of my grandmother Velia I know that she married at the age of 13. In those distant times it was normal. I do not know how old she was at the time of her second marriage to my grandfather. I remem-

ber a rather small old lady, always wearing a long dress, a wig and a kerchief, who said little, was very gentle and kind, and whose face was still bearing traces of past beauty. All her daughters with the exception of Katia, her second youngest, inherited her beauty. Looking at my aunts and my mother in their old age, I always saw Grandmother. Similarity was astonishing.

I remember Grandmother when she was paralyzed. Mother told me how it happened. Before the revolution of 1917 my uncle Pavel, nicknamed in the family Faivel («Chestnut»), had a ready-made clothes store on Bazaar Square in Odessa. At that time he was still a bachelor. Once, late at night, he was crossing Bazaar Square on the way back from his friends' house. He ran into a policeman who was pursuing a thief while making strokes with his sword. By accident, my uncle's head took the blow. The policeman knew my uncle well. He waved down a cab and took him to the hospital. Fortunately, the wound was not dangerous, and the same policeman drove Pavel home, to Grandfather and Grandmother. They were sitting at a small table playing domino. This was their favorite entertainment. The policeman guided my uncle into the room and fell on his knees in front of them to beg pardon for his unwilling fault. Grandmother saw bloodstained bandages – and suffered an instant stroke, freezing in the position she had assumed as she sat down: right arm bent at the elbow, one leg paralyzed.

For the next nine years her condition was steadily worsening. When Grandfather fell ill, the family moved her to Uncle Efim's apartment next door in order to protect her fragile health from the shock of grief. She did not see Grandfather's death and funeral. After *shiva* they brought her back home and told her that Grandfather is sick and had been taken to the hospital. She sensed that something was wrong and kept asking, kept getting the same answer. Once the two of us were alone in the room. I was playing at her feet on the rug. She started talking about Grandfather: apparently, she had found children's small talks and reticence suspicious. I was small and loved her very much – and so, I said:

– Grandmother, they are not telling you how it really was. They put Grandfather into a black box; then black horses came. They put the box there and took Grandfather away!

Then, of course, she realized what had happened much better than I could at that time. She burst into tears and from that day on her disease started progressing. Her condition was worsening: she stopped getting up, and then stopped talking, more and more often wetted her bed, and finally in about 8 months she died.



**Sofa's Bekker grandparents – Veli and Isaak Gurevich –
her mother Anna's parents. 1905, Odessa, Russia.**



**Sofa's Rozenfeld - Bekker grandparents -
her father Markus Rozenfeld's parents. 1905, Odessa, Russia.**

MY MOTHER

At home they called her «Aniuta». Her Jewish name was Enia like her grandmother's; for the Russians she was Anna Isaakovna. Her official date of birth was March 9, 1883, but my mother always insisted that her father had forged birth certificates of all his children when one of the brothers was in danger of being drafted into the Tsarist army. He subtracted five years from their actual ages, and argued that their brother could not leave the family with so many small children.

Mother was beautiful, smart, and strong-willed and had a powerful personality. She was merry and sociable. Still, she believed that she'd pulled the wrong ticket in life. When she was born, her parents were past middle age and might have retired by then. They could not finance her education. Only two oldest siblings got to study at school. I think, my mother did not go to school at all, and learned reading and writing on her own. She was an able person and always regretted her lack of education.

As I come to think about it, I realize that when the Soviets arrived my mother was only 24, and that she had a chance to start from elementary school and study right up to college degree. At some point she did attend Literacy courses, but dropped out because she felt awkward and learning did not go easy.

Mother started working at 13. She was sent to a sewing-shop as apprentice, I believe it happened in 1906. Bitterness and anger invariably colored my mother's stories of this period. The sewing-shop was located in Odessa. Many girls worked for the owner of the shop from early morning till late at night. There was a clock on the wall, but the owner was in the habit of winding it back to make the girls work longer hours. To have this clock in the room at all, these girls had to go on a strike. These girls were treated in a way common for those times: first they were made to nurse the owner's kids and take care of his house, then, after a small rebellion, they'd start learning. This is how my mother gained her expertise as a seamstress. She could make every kind of garment she wanted: from lingerie to evening gowns. When I was a child, she used to make overcoats and hats for me.

She barely ever talked about her early childhood and youth. Now I wish I had pressed her to talk on this subject. I know that her father called her «Police Chief» because she was a true daredevil. Her father's will was a law in the family. The only one who had the courage to contradict him was my mother. For example, he once ordered them to pour out the food my mother had warmed on the

stove on a Saturday. My grandfather was a very religious man, and religious Jews cannot light fire on Shabbat. My mother said: «What's the big problem? – I will light it and jump aside!» In her maidenhood she would hide from her father's eyes to finish sewing a dress she wanted to wear for Shabbat. Interestingly, in spite of her strictly religious upbringing, she remained a complete atheist until the end of her life.

Mother was fond of telling funny stories about her suitors. One of them once received an invitation to a party. «How can I go?» he said. «I've never been to their house before!» And Mother replied: «If you don't go the first time, you do not get to go the second time». The other admirer proposed to her. She liked him well enough until once she overheard his mother say: «What kind of dowry will you take after her?» After this incident my mother rejected the boy. She was offended, even though in those days brides were expected to bring dowry to their grooms' houses. Mother's parents were not wealthy. They had 5 daughters and could give no dowry for any of them. Still, all 5 girls got married. One of my mother's suitors wanted to take her as his wife to America. Mother agreed, but her father said to the young man: «My girls are not going to the next world». For him, if one left for America, one was as good as dead.

Mama said that in a while this young man had sent her an invitation (or «green-card», as she put it), and that she had not been able to go against her father's will. Had it happened differently, I could have been born in America. Had it happened, it is hard to imagine what my life would have been like.

In 1912 my mother married Abraham Yelin. She never told me how or where they met and, unfortunately, I never asked.

They rented a 1st floor space on Peresyp' Street in Odessa and immediately opened a hardware store. Their living quarters were in the back of the store. I was born a year later, in 1913. I know that grandmother Yelin had 3 sons and 2 daughters. By the time I was born grandfather Yelin had been dead.

As I said before, my mother was beautiful, smart and lively. She furnished their apartment nicely; she was helping my father out in the store and taking care of the household at the same time. According to her, I was a very mellow and quiet child, fond of eating and sleeping well. Once I was walking around the apartment on my toy stilts – and fell into the staircase and down into the basement. I did not even cry out. I went to sleep right there, in the basement, where Mama found me later. I also remember that we had a huge black dog and I liked

riding on its back.

Mama had good neighbors, older women who taught her how to cook and manage household reasonably. I was nearly one when my mother noticed that at night Father was frequently absent. One day a neighbor came over, and when the issue came up, she said: «Take your flashlight and I'll show you whereabouts of your husband». She took my mother to the barn in the yard. Mama opened the door, and in the beam of her flashlight she saw my father lying on a stack of hay with a Russian woman. She was deeply hurt. She returned home and started ripping off curtains and drapes and packing her belongings. Then she called a cab, picked me up, loaded everything into the cab and drove off to her parents' house. Later my father begged her to come back, apologizing and swearing that this would not happen again – but my mother stood firm. My father's mother told her: «What's the big deal? My husband used to bring his mistress into our bedroom. They were in one bed, and I was in the other. And I survived.» But my mother was very proud and touchy, and she could not forgive my father's betrayal. The year was 1914. The First World War broke out. My father received call-up papers, but he did not want to join the army. He asked Mama to persuade Mayor or Chief of the Police to release him from military service for a certain amount of money. At that point Mama pitied him and did what he wanted. Whether she succeeded in negotiating his release, or he avoided the draft on his own I do not know, but soon after that he was infected with typhoid fever during an outbreak and died. Mama and I kept on living with grandparents.

I barely remember my father. As if in a dream, I recall sounds of shots, pieces of broken glass and my father (who else?) carrying me under one arm, and Lulia – his brother Efim's daughter – under the other. Was it war or pogrom? – Hard to say. All I know is that he was taking us to a safe shelter. I seem to remember that he was of medium height, with moustache. Now I regret never asking his family members for his photo – they would have given it to me.

Mama was a very proud woman. She never forgave my father and took his death with utter indifference. We kept on living with Grandpa and Grandma. I was trusted in the care of Mother's sister Katia who was yet a maiden. She loved me a lot, and was ready at any moment «to scratch out the eyes of my offenders», as they say. She was certainly spoiling me. For example, once I quarreled with a neighbor's boy. His mother slapped me, and Aunt Katia rushed to my side and almost started a fistfight with the woman. When Mama came

home from work and learned about the incident, she reproved Katia for what she saw as undignified behavior.

I must say that, in spite of her lack of education, Mama was generally a warm and intelligent person, imbued with inherent noble spirit that she made every effort to pass to us, her children. I still feel its influence on me – and the same could be said of my sister. Our parents were neither common, nor ignorant. As Mama always said – «Upbringing comes ahead of education».

After the death of my grandparents we took a tenant, a young man, 3 years older than Mama. He had come from a settlement of Berezovka (Odessa area) to find employment in Odessa. His name was Markus Rosenfeldt, or Mottle in Yiddish. He soon grew very fond of my mother even though she already had a child and a younger girl – Katia – was available in the same household. He was quiet, modest, did not talk much and was very provincial. He took a liking to me and was very caring and gentle. This, probably, meant a lot to my mother. One summer I was sent to a retreat. Markus visited me there and brought some presents. This gesture appealed to Mama so much that she agreed to marry him. He promised to treat me as his own child. He said that he'd never hurt me or scream at me. And he kept his promise.

By nature he and Mama were very different personalities. He was much more of a commoner, a typical provincial Jew from a settlement. This sometimes aggrieved and irritated my mother. On the other hand, Markus loved her, was tender and caring, and always called her «My *Outochka*» («My Ducky») – an endearment derived from her domestic name «*Anioutochka*» – «Little Anna». What was their wedding like? – Did they have a wedding at all? I do not remember. I only know that Mama took me to Grandma Yelin's house on Herson Street and there I visited for a few days. First I called Markus simply by his first name, without even adding «Uncle». But he was so good and caring, that very soon, and without anyone's suggestion, I started calling him «Daddy» – or «Papa». And this is how I am going to refer to him in this book from now on. He was my real father for many years, even though his influence on my upbringing was minimal. It was my mother's domain. Still, I am happy that I was brought up in a family rather than by a «single mother», as they used to put it in the Soviet Union. Besides, I could have had a father who'd treat me badly, hit me, scream at me and get irritated by my impish behavior. Thanks God, this never happened, and for this I am very grateful to my destiny and my father.

Soon after their marriage, my parents rented two rooms in the house where my grandparents had lived (24 Prokhorovskaia Street), in the apartment that belonged to the former owner of the house, Madam Rosentoul'. Judging by her name, she may have been German. But she was certainly not Jewish.

When they settled down, my mother started planning a visit to Markus's parents in Berezovka. They were eager to meet their son's new wife. They were nice, decent people and they came to like my mother. Their only objection may have been that Papa took a woman with a child instead of a maiden. Mother intentionally left me at home with Markus in order «to investigate the situation». Papa's immediate family in Berezovka consisted of his parents and his younger brother Yasha (Jacob). Papa's older brother Pinya lived separately with his wife and two kids – a son and a daughter. Their younger sister Pearl (Polia), her husband and their son and daughter lived in Pinya's household.

After Mama's visit to Berezovka, Papa's relatives visited Odessa from time to time and stayed with us during their visits. Uncle Yasha left home at 18 and moved to Odessa to look for a job. At first he lived with us. As he found employment and started making money, he rented a room from one Jewish family. Initially my mother liked Father's family and always welcomed them to our house. One unpleasant incident changed all that.

This incident took place during one of their visits, when we'd already moved to the intersection of Yevreiskaia and Preobrazhenskaia Streets. We had an apartment on the ground floor: two rooms and a kitchen. Mama baked and cooked for our guests' arrival, and she laid out a nice table. Grandmother sat by Papa's side.

Here I must add that Papa was a tall, rather handsome man who – same as Mother – was going on overweight after their marriage. During the meal Grandmother kept putting extra helpings of various dishes on his plate. Finally, Mama remarked jokingly: «Momma, why do you keep serving Markus all this food? See how well he looks! I feed him good. So why don't you offer something to me instead?» «O-o-oy, Anioutochka!» Grandmother replied in Yiddish, «He is my son and you are a stranger, that's why».

Whether she meant what she said or it was just an expression of a simple mind – but my mother was offended for life. She told my father that, if his mother considered her a stranger, she had no wish to see or hear her again. And she kept true to her word. She never saw her mother-in-law again, and certainly she never wrote to her.

Justice granted, Aunt Polia, who was also present at that table, grasped the situation and tried to help her mother:

«Mother! What are you saying?!»

But it was too late.

As a mother-in-law myself, I now realize that Grandmother – may she rest in peace! – was wrong. If my children are happy with their spouses, I make no difference between them: they are all blood and family to me.

Sofa's mother Anna, father Markus and sister Valia.



1910, Odessa, Russia.



**On the resort on the Black Sea,
1938.**



1935, Leningrad



“Dacha”, near Riga, Latvia, 1957..

UNCLE YASHA

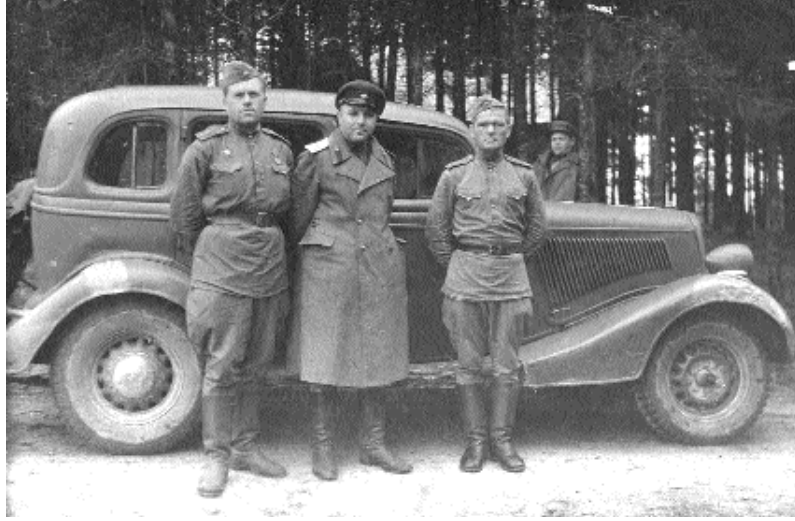
Uncle Yasha, Papa's youngest and best educated brother was a talkative and interesting man. Earlier I mentioned that he moved to Odessa at 18 and rented a room in the basement apartment from three unmarried sisters. He started courting Rosa, the youngest, and they had an affair. My parents moved to Leningrad in 1924. Uncle Yasha arrived a bit later – around 1926. As soon as he found the job, Aunt Rosa joined him and they got married. He used to say that it hadn't been his idea; that he hadn't loved her and hadn't asked her to come. But once she was there, he as a decent man had to marry her and start a family.

In 1928, after a very difficult pregnancy, Aunt Rosa gave birth to their son Senya, and in 1935 their daughter Beba was born. Their life was difficult. They always had problems with housing. Before the war they started building a house somewhere in the suburbs of Leningrad – in Ghatchina, I think. During German occupation this house was destroyed. After changing many different jobs, Uncle Yasha spent the last 18 years before retirement as head of Administration and Supplies Department of the Leningrad sea-port. This was a prestigious and well-paid position. In the first days of the war uncle Yasha volunteered to the front. First he took different positions in different detachments, then met General Alekseev and became head of Administration and Supplies in his division headquarters. He commanded great respect from everyone, including his colleagues, and, being an influential man, was of great help to our family. How exactly – I will describe later. He remained friends with the General until the latter's death. General Alekseev liked him and after the war Uncle Yasha visited him in his house.

After the war Uncle Yasha came back to work for the sea-port, and his family returned from evacuation. War took a heavy toll on his wife Aunt Rosa – as it did on everyone. Unfortunately, she was diagnosed with cancer and died in the summer of 1952 in great sufferings. My mother had never been friends with Uncle Yasha and his family, but in this difficult period she was very attentive to them and even advised Uncle Yasha to come to our dacha on Riga sea-coast and bring his daughter Beba who was then 17. We treated them well, and he left Beba with us for a while. I pitied the girl who was orphaned so early in life. I worried whether atmosphere in our house would be appropriate for a person who had just lost her mother. But Beba never cried or whined; she behaved in a normal way and showed no signs of mourning. She regularly went to the cinema and listened to music.

At 18 or 19 Beba graduated from a technical school and married a young man called Yasha Kramm who had come to Leningrad to study from Belarus. A year later they had a daughter who was named Rosanna after Grandmother.

Soon after Beba's wedding Uncle Yasha re-married himself, taking a woman of his own age, Tsilya Grigorievna, who was a beautician and worked for very prestigious beauty parlors. Since then 28 years have passed and they are still very happy with each other. In his first marriage Uncle Yasha was not happy: there were too many differences between him and Aunt Rosa. Tsilya Grigorievna is a cultured, intelligent and sophisticated woman. About her first marriage I know that she got married rather late to a widower with three children. The youngest was only 3 years old. She loved her adopted children and they loved her back. All called her «Mother», and this shows that she has a good soul, because not every woman can feel and be a mother to adopted children. Also, it was important that Tsilya Grigorievna had no children of her own. I, however, agree with folk wisdom that says: true mother is not the one who gives birth, but the one who takes care of you. Tsilya Grigorievna brought up her adopted children. Yasha, the youngest, had a gift for music, and she helped him to become a musician. He graduated from Leningrad conservatory and worked for many years for the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra as second violin leader. While her son was studying, Tsilya Grigorievna learned to play the piano herself. Her first husband, apparently, was very well off, for he alone was able to provide for the entire family. He died fairly early. One of Tsilya Grigorievna's daughters immigrated to America with 3rd wave emigration. Unfortunately, she perished here 2 years ago in a car accident. I don't think Tsilya Grigorievna knows about it. People say this daughter of hers was a little odd.



**Sofa's uncle Yasha (in center) – father's brother –
officer in the Soviet Army during the war,
1941 – 1945**



**Uncle Yasha with his son Semyon – officer of the Soviet Army.
Leningrad, Russia.**



**Uncle Yasha's daughter
Beba with Sofa and
Mark. Israel.**



**Uncle Yasha's granddaughter
Rosanna with her husband Sergey
and sons Jonathan and Aaron.
New York.**



**Mark's last photo with Beba, Rosanna and Inna.
New York, November 2001.**

BEBA

After twelve years of marriage Beba divorced her husband without telling anyone why. As many other Soviet families, they started their life together in a communal apartment where the three of them – Beba, her student husband and their baby – lived in one room. Between work, baby care and household duties there was little left for positive emotions. Gradually their living arrangements improved. Yasha finished his studies and started working. Whether it was discontent, accumulated during the years of hardships, or something else – but they parted when Rosanna was eleven. Beba and her daughter moved to a one-room studio and were happy to have it. It didn't take much for Soviet people to be happy. Beba worked and took care of her daughter. At eighteen Rosanna got married to a Russian boy, an artist. Wedding was celebrated in a restaurant and Rosanna's father was among the guests. He had re-married by then, and his second wife bore him a son. Rosanna worked and took evening courses at the University. Her family life was fine. In 2-3 years Beba decided to leave for Israel. She had no relatives there, only friends. She was a tall, good-looking blonde, tumultuous and restless by nature. She was ready to go alone, but Rosanna decided to accompany her. Rosanna's husband refused to go: he could not leave his mother and grandmother who had raised him and, being ethnic Russians, would not even think of Israel. They parted well, without fights or property disputes. She lived with him until the very last day, and he took Beba and her to the airport.

Starting new life in Israel with no language and no means of support was not easy for two lonely women. They, however, did well. They learned the language and started working and studying as nearly all other immigrants did. They even bought an apartment. Rosanna met a young man named Seriozha who had arrived with his parents and younger brother from Baku (Azerbaijan). Seriozha went to New York as a tourist and decided to stay in the US. He found a programmer's job and invited Rosanna to join him. She came and they legalized their union.

At the beginning Rosanna worked for cash as a manicurist in a hair salon. She could not work for check without a green card. One of her clients, a rich lady, learned about her situation and offered to organize *chupa* – or Jewish ritual wedding – for Rosanna and Seriozha. This lady invited 60 personal friends of hers to the ceremony and was convinced that she'd done *a mitzvah* – a good deed. When I asked Rosanna if the newlyweds had received any financial

support from their patroness, her answer was negative. To this day Rosanna and Seriozha are on very good terms with this American family and meet them regularly. As for Beba, she stayed in Israel and in 1981 married one Joseph, a Jew from Riga. She is happy in this marriage, which is good, because she is not alone any more. I can imagine how lonely she felt after Rosanna's departure – even though she had another boyfriend at that time.

Uncle Yasha's first son Senya did not do much with his life. I rarely saw him. At some point he studied in a military academy, but he did not make a military career. He did not have a proper family, living for long periods of time with different women and then leaving them. At last, he met a woman with a child and stayed with her for good. The girl grew up under his supervision, got married and gave birth to his grandchild. He never was close to his father or his sister Beba. Willing to meet all relatives on one of my visits from Riga to Leningrad, 2 or 3 years before our emigration, I asked Uncle Yasha to invite Senya with his spouse and Beba. I had not met Senya since the war; I'd never met his wife at all. She made a good impression on me. Aunt Rosa's older sister left for America at 15 (in 1910 or 1915). There she married and had several children. For a while she kept sending packages to help out her sisters. In Israel Beba and Rosanna learned that she had died and her children did not want to acknowledge newly arrived relatives from Russia. On Beba's request, I made an attempt to contact them, but their phone number was unlisted. Rosanna's American friend – the one who arranged *chupa* for her – finally found them and they had a pretty harsh conversation.

MY CHILDHOOD

Now it is time to resume the story of my parents and my childhood.

We lived then on Prokhorovskaia, number 24. I remember two episodes from that period. The first one was when father bought little boots for me, brought them home and both of them decided to see how they fit. They discovered that my right foot «turns» differently compared to the left, and has a different shape. They took me to the doctor who said that I have to wear a cast. In the next several years I had to wear a cast on and off. One doctor said that I need a surgery. Mama took me to the hospital and asked the doctor what kind of surgery I needed – whether they would need to cut up my leg or not. The doctor answered: «This is our business; the child is in our care». Mama immediately took me back home. She did not like this answer and the doctor's manner. She was also scared of this surgery because Sasha, her favorite nephew, son of her sister Sonia, had had these surgeries many times. In my opinion, however, they only helped him: he walked better, having troubles only bending his knee, while before the surgeries he used to drag his foot.

In Leningrad I regularly visited Turner's Orthopedic Institute where they examined and observed me, but never actually did anything.

Already a married woman, I arranged a consultation with Professor Kuslik. He examined my leg and said that my problem was the result of childhood polio. Neither my parents, nor myself know when this disease struck me. I remember myself being sick in childhood only twice. The first time it happened when I was still very small and we lived in Grandpa's apartment. Physician diagnosed a flu and prescribed sweet cough medicine: one spoon three times a day. I liked the taste of this medicine so much that I emptied the entire bottle when no adults happened around. Maybe this sickness was actually «polio»?

The second time I got measles when Mama already lived with Papa on Prokhorovskaia Street. My condition was not that serious, but I had to stay in bed for a while to avoid complications.

The lady who owned our apartment vanished together with her son who was my age. One day doorbell rang and the GPU (Department of State Politics) officials came in. They searched the owner's rooms. She was suspected of being a member of a criminal group that was making fake money. They took the owner's boy's toys and gave them to me. Later my parents rented an apartment on the corner of Yevreiskaia and Preobrazhenskaia Streets.

They bought a piano and I started taking music lessons. Later on German, French and some other disciplines were added. Mama did not want me to attend a Soviet school: she believed that mixed sex education would be bad for me. This certainly had negative effect on my future. I forgot to mention that, while on Prokhorovskaia, Mama and her neighbor, who had a son my age, hired a Hebrew teacher. He was teaching us to read and write in Hebrew. For some reason, these lessons did not last, and I memorized only one letter – called «lamed».

As most children, I had little enthusiasm for music lessons. Still, our mother, having had no education herself, tried to give as much knowledge as possible to me and later to my sister Valia. She sat by my side when I practiced on my own, as well as during the lessons. Eventually, she learned quite a bit herself. Myself, I had no gift for music and, having studied all in all for 15 years, I still cannot play the piano. Still, these lessons taught me to love and understand music, and I have managed to pass this appreciation to my husband and our children. Thus, I am very grateful to my mother. She even sent me to study to Stoliarsky's music school that was located on our street.

In that house we had different neighbors. We befriended some of them, such as the Kuniatsky family. They lived in a luxurious huge apartment with the main entrance from Preobrazhenskaia Street and the back entrance from Yevreiskaia. They owned a pharmacy in the same house, and Misha Kuniatsky, head of the family, worked there. We were friends with his wife Mania, his mother-in-law and his three children. The oldest girl was a year or two older than me, the second was a year younger. Their son was the youngest. We were very close with this family, and I want to write about them in more details.

Madam Kuniatsky, as everyone called her, was said to be an educated lady. She probably was a gymnasium graduate. In those times gymnasias were considered the best place for girl education. She read a lot. She was always lying on the sofa with a book. Her mother Madam Schwartzman and a maid were taking care of the house. Her husband was very intelligent, kind and gentle. Best of all, he was an excellent husband.

My mother used to ask Madam Schwartzman: «How did you manage to find such a good husband for your daughter?» And she would respond in Yiddish, in her low voice: «I had a tall, skimpy, greenish and unbecoming daughter and I kept begging Our Lord – «God, please, give my daughter a good husband!» And He sent us Misha.»

My mother memorized this trick. I was only ten years old, but she kept asking God to send me a husband like Misha Kuniansky all the same.

I will jump ahead to say that my husband truly has much in common with Misha – both in character and in appearance, especially in height and hair color.

My mother did not want to have more children; therefore, during the years of her married life with Papa, she made 18 abortions. She told me this when I was already an adult. Apparently, in those days they had no contraceptives and knew little about other means of birth control. Finally, the doctors told her that she could not make any more abortions: the walls of her uterus had become too thin. Thus, my sister was born.

On April 23, 1923, Mama gave birth to a girl who was named Valia after my maternal grandmother Velia. She was the third Valia in the Gurevich family: the first one was the daughter of Uncle Pava, mother's brother; the second one – the daughter of Aunt Katia. I was 10 when my sister was born, and I clearly remember the circumstances of her birth. For some reason, at that time it was considered preferable to give birth at home. Mama invited a midwife to take care of her and the newborn. The midwife came, examined my mother and said that contractions may start at any moment, but that she could not stay: she was expected by some other pregnant woman on the other side of the town and that woman had very serious pregnancy complications. Therefore, the midwife had to be by her side. She gave us the address of that lady and left.

Telephones were a rarity in Odessa. I do not think any of our relatives or friends had one. Contractions started in the middle of the night and Mama sent my father to look for the midwife. For some reason he traveled on foot to the other end of the town, in complete darkness, trying to find the needed address. Now I know why he started off on foot. Either there was no public transportation i.e. trolley, pulled by horses – or he could not call a cab; or else, there were no cabs at night. By the time Papa returned, it was dawn, and the baby had been born. I woke up, of course, and was trying to help out to the best of my abilities. Mama kept asking to put a cushion under her back; to bring her water, and the like. When the pain became unbearable, she asked me to go up to Kuniansky's place and beg them to come over.

Their back entrance was next to our door. In spite of the darkness, I went and started knocking. It took time for them to wake up,

but finally the entire family was awake. When I told them what was happening, Madam Kuniansky fainted, and Madam Schwartzman, her mother, said the sight of birth pangs will make her sick. Eventually, Mr. Kuniansky and their housemaid were the ones who walked down with me. By that time Mama had already given birth on her own. She asked them to wrap up the baby. Soon Papa arrived with the midwife who cut the umbilical cord and took care of the baby. When Mr. Kuniansky congratulated Papa with a daughter, the latter got so upset that it was a girl, not a boy, that he could not go and see my mother right away. After that, Mama was terribly sick for a long time. She had a lot of milk, and the baby was small and could not suck properly. Neither milk-draining devices helped much. Mama almost died. The doctor told us to find an 8-10 month old nursing infant: in his opinion, this was the only option. We started looking. Finally, Papa found a woman from distant, poor neighborhood. She had a boy Joseph, about 10 months old. This was Mama's salvation. When Papa brought this woman for the first time and she saw my mother barely alive, with black crusted lips, she got scared and was reluctant to give her the baby. But Papa paid her well, and the baby started sucking.

Mama immediately felt better and opened her eyes. I remember this woman living with us for a long time until Mama recovered and started walking and Valia grew up a bit. Thus I acquired a foster brother.

During her sickness Mama lost a lot of weight and changed in appearance. Once she was taking a walk with Papa and he said, pointing at a lady who was passing by: «Look! What a plump, nice-looking woman!» That meant: «She looks better than you do». Mother felt hurt and she decided to make an effort and add some weight. In the middle of the summer she decided to take us, kids, to the country. At that time food was scarce, and they decided to go to the country village and live with peasants. Add to this, we had to go in a horse-drawn wagon.

Now it is hard to imagine where she got the courage to travel on cobblestone roads with a small nursing baby to some unfamiliar village...

...Especially because this trip was preceded by one terrible event. Mother's acquaintance, a Makhaghon (I forgot her name), relative of the Mochmans who were close to the family of Aunt Sonia (Mother's older sister), took a wagon to one of the villages near Odessa to buy food or exchange clothes for food. Ukraine then was

in the grip of hunger. The drivers robbed her, beat her up and tied her with ropes to the reins. Then they urged horses on, and she was dragged behind, bumping on cobble stones until she perished. Her body was brought home and Mama went to the funeral. She took me along. This happened before Valia's birth.

It made a horrible impression on me. That is why our trip to the country was scaring me a lot. Safe arrival was all I cared about.

In fact, our family did not suffer from hunger, for we stored a lot of summer and fall harvest in our basement. We had various vegetables and fruits: potatoes, carrots, squash and many other things. Besides, we had flour, corn, various pickled foods and preserves. Every now and then Mama took baskets of food to her sisters and even fed homeless people who were in a particularly bad shape. Back then all her sisters still lived in Odessa.

We spent a month and a half in the country and returned home. Mama recovered completely, gained weight and gained back her beauty.

My mother was rather secretive by nature. Until late in her life, she never told anyone that Papa was her second husband and that Valia was my half-sister. Certainly, Valia herself knew nothing about it. Besides, our parents made no distinction between us and I loved her very much. I always watched over her like a second mother. I was 10 years older and for my age I was very mature and independent. By Valia's birth Mama's sisters had already moved from Odessa to Petrograd. They left one by one, one following the other.

Aunt Fira, her husband Uncle Sasha and their daughter Alla were the first to leave. Aunt Sonia and her family took off next – and she was the one who lured out Aunt Katia and Aunt Rachel with their families. Eventually only my mother of all sisters remained in Odessa. Aunt Sonia kept writing letters to her, begging her to move to Petrograd. «Sell everything and come here with your family. Life is nice here». These were her exact words. According to her, it was almost as if semolina was falling from heaven in Petrograd. Mama waited and waited – and finally succumbed. At that time our apartment was well furnished. We had a piano and everything we needed. Mama decided to follow Aunt Sonia's advice and sell everything in order to start a new life in Petrograd. First Papa went there alone to find a job. Mama and us, 2 kids, joined him a month and a half later. Papa must have left soon after New Year's Eve in 1924. If I remember correctly, we arrived to Petrograd on February 22nd. Lenin already died and the city was renamed after him: to Leningrad. Valia

was 10 months old; I was going on my 11th year. Furniture had been sold: all we had was «soft» luggage. Job hunting had not been easy for Papa. Unemployment was high that year. Constant worrying took its toll and he developed ulcer of the duodenum. His job was to sell leather goods near Alexandrovsky marketplace, on the corner of Sadovaia Street and Maiorov Drive. He rented a small room not far from the market from one single woman. We had no utilities there: cooking had to be done on primus stove. Of all commodities we had only two miserable iron-frame beds, a table on a cross-piece and a few stools. Still, everything looked neat, properly rigged with white covers. All this could not fail to upset Mama. Not mentioning the fact that from then on Papa had perpetual stomach problems. He had to follow various diets and pay regular visits to doctors and medical authorities. Mama had to start working to help Papa out.

Initially our life in Leningrad was difficult. Mama, however, was a very energetic person, and she rushed into action. First she found a new room for us in a big quality apartment not far from Mariinsky Theater. There was nothing there but iron-frame beds. Mama re-made white cardboard boxes into closets and cabinets. The room looked neat; white covers were everywhere. My sister Valia was a difficult child. Mama nicknamed her Screamer because she always cried, screamed and whined. No physician could tell why. Since Mama had to help Papa out with his business, she hired a nanny for Valia.

Imagine a scene like this: Valia is going to the doctor in nanny's arms; Mama is following the nanny, and I am running after Mama. We ring the doorbell. It is a private office, of course. The entire procession with screaming baby at the head enters the hallway. Valia's screams prevent the doctor from hearing our explanations and us – from hearing his advice. He, however, advises nothing and leaves us in the hallway. He brings a prescription for some kind of medication and sends us home. Valia, in the meantime, keeps screaming...

From too much screaming she developed a navel hernia. Something must have been wrong with her back then: modern medicine would surely find the cause. One of Valia's nannies was a Ukrainian called Tatiana, an aged country woman. To keep Valia from screaming her lungs out and attracting everybody's attention during their daily walks, she started giving her poppy-seed potion to help her sleep. Mama learned about it and fired her. Finding a nanny for Valia was difficult. Most of them endured her screams no longer than a few days. Apartment owners also did not like listening to a

screaming baby day and night. Wherever our parents rented a room – soon we were asked to leave the premises.

Mama rented our next home – a medium-size room – from an old man. It was in Taurov Lane, not far from Sennoi Marketplace. The room was only large enough to accommodate two beds and a crib. Mama asked the owner for permission to put nanny's bed in the kitchen. I slept with nanny. The owner's adult daughter used to calculate household expenses with the help of an abacus, and I learned to use it from her. From our nanny I learned to tell fortune with the help of cards. I absorbed everything I saw or heard.

We did not stay long there, for the owner's room was next to ours and Valia's screams kept him up all night. It was then that I found Young Pioneers Unit in the neighborhood and joined their ranks. They were located in Mariinsky Theater area. Back then Young Pioneers Organizations existed separately from schools unlike later, when they became school-based.

Mama still kept me out of school. She still thought that Soviet schools would be bad for me because of unisex education policy. And I kept taking private lessons.

I remember a flood in Leningrad. It happened, I think, on November 23, 1924. I had never seen floods before. I was about to leave for a meeting of Young Pioneers. Parents were still at work, and neighbors told me: «Do not go, streets are flooded.» But I could not imagine missing a meeting. I started down the stairs and suddenly I noticed that water had filled our courtyard and was almost up to our front entrance. I stood there, watching water rise, and rise, and rise... My parents waded chest-deep in water from work. They described how water flooded ground-floor apartments and they said that people were moving around in boats. Later I read Pushkin's «The Bronze Horseman» and wrote a long poem myself about the flood, borrowing the meter from Pushkin. In my girlhood I used to write poems, as did most girls my age. Some of those poems were pretty good. Later teachers always advised me to take up a career in literature. I invariably participated in school concerts where I recited my own poems and poems written by different poets. Best of all I liked Pushkin. I knew a lot of poetry by heart and liked reciting it. I was also singing in a school choir, and continued doing this after graduation.

At 13 I was independent and mature. Mama finally took me to school. They told us that I have to take exams because they need to check the extent of my knowledge and decide which grade I should go to. Mama always was the one and only person in charge of our

upbringing and education. She sensed that I was serious about school and hired a tutor to brush up my knowledge. He was hoping that I'd be accepted to the 4th grade. Instead I was put in the 3rd. All the same, I was happy to be at school.

I was a good pupil, even though we were subjected to a lot of experimentations that came with the reconstruction of school system. One day we'd study according to Dalton's Plan. The other day we'd switch to the Team System. I will explain the meaning of both.

Under Dalton's Plan system, a teacher breaks up a topic into parts and assigns each student to report on one part in class. Each of us was supposed to prepare one theme and listen to the others. We were, however, children, and therefore not very diligent. Upon completing one's task, one would ignore other reports, chat and engage in other activities during the lesson. In other words, this system did not work.

The Team System suggested that the class should be divided into groups (teams) of 4-5 pupils. Members of one team were supposed to discuss the assignment between themselves. One group member had to write down the results of the discussion and bring this written report to the teacher. The teacher had to evaluate the efforts of the entire team. This system allowed for even more talking and distraction compared to the Dalton's Plan. Both systems were soon discarded, and schools returned to the traditional method of individual assignments. Generally, that time was marked by efforts to find new methods of teaching to better fit the Soviet regime.

I was a good student, honest and thoughtful. I was the only Jewish girl in my class, but this did not affect the attitude of other children: everyone treated me well. I was frequently assigned to socially important positions, such as class chairperson, or class elder, and the like. At that time anti-Semitism did not exist – at least, I never suffered from it. I befriended 3 girls in my class, and our friendship lasted until my departure to America. These girls were: Zoia Dolbikhina, Galia Moreva and Valia Afanasieva. I was called Sarrah Rosenfeld at school. Taking first letters of our family names, we abbreviated ourselves as MARD – Moreva, Afanasieva, Rosenfeld and Dolbikhina. We were all born in 1913, except Galia who was born in 1915. Our social origin was also different. Zoia's ancestors were nobles; Valia was of peasant origin, Galia – I can't say, probably her father was an office-worker. And I, of course, belonged to middle-class.

At that time I started studying music with a private teacher. We

did not have the piano, and Mama arranged for me to go and practice every day at her friends' house. All in all, I studied music for 15 years. I had no particular talent for music. Still, I do not regret spending so much time on it because these lessons added a lot to my general development and culture. I learned to appreciate music and later passed this appreciation to my own children.

I was very fond of school and often stayed after the classes. I took active part in various student activities; I sang in the student choir and joined dramatic acting group. I knew many poems by Pushkin, Lermontov and other poets by heart. Once we decided to stage Ghoghol's «Marriage» and could not find a boy actor for the role of the groom. Everyone decided that I was the best candidate for this role. This show ran for a long time with great success at school, in our adopted organizations and in military unit headquarters.

The Soviet government issued a decree «On the Liquidation of Illiteracy in the Country. A popular slogan called to «leave not a single illiterate person in the Soviet Union». After their classes school and college students had to go to different organizations and «liquidate illiteracy» among adults and the elderly. Residential housing committees also provided premises for literacy courses. My mother and my husband's mother attended them for a while. We taught them reading, writing and arithmetic.

I resolved all issues related to my education on my own. As I said before, my parents were uneducated and could offer no advice. All Mama wanted for us was good education. She, however, could not guide and direct us. From the age of 13 I was the most literate person in the family. On my parents' request I often filled out official questionnaires and wrote letters in their names to different organizations, as well as to financial inspectors when Papa had to change jobs.

When we lived in Kuznechnyi Lane, my parents opened a dry-cleaning shop not far from our house. Papa was considered disabled because of his ulcer, therefore he was granted permission to work as «single private enterpriser». Dry cleaning business did not succeed. They closed the shop and Papa went to work in a booth in Sennoi Market. Mama assisted him: she was the manager and Papa received the goods. Since they were registered as «Disfranchisers» (i.e. their voting privileges had been recalled by the government), they decided that it would be better for my future if my official place of residence was Aunt Fira's, mother's sister's house. Aunt Fira was registered as «Laborer». And so it was done.

After 2 years of studies I graduated from drafting courses and

was faced with the prospect of looking for a job. Fortunately, one of my parents' acquaintances, a man called Ghaft, worked for the planning department at the 7th Military Factory. He helped me to get a position at the forge division designers' office. I liked this job for two reasons: first, I was able to learn from experienced designers who worked there; second, I had a chance to observe how my designs were applied to practice. While working, I kept dreaming about college education. To apply to college I had to have high school diploma which I did not have, because I had completed only seven and a half years of school. In a while we, four girlfriends, found college preparation courses located on the Petrograd Side.

I worked on the Vyborg Side and we lived in downtown, on Kuznechnyi. Working and studying was hard. I had to get up early in the morning in order to get to the factory by 8 a.m. After work I returned home for dinner. By my arrival food had to be hot and already on the table, for I had very little time. After a hasty meal, I had to rush to the other end of the city – and returned home late at night. The only kind of available public transportation were trolleys and they were perpetually overcrowded. At every stop trolley cars were literally stormed by crowds. People rode hanging from footboards and backside buffers. I always ended up hanging off the footboard of the last car. It was considered relatively safe: if you fall, then at least not under the wheels. In these cars clothes would get rumpled and torn; buttons would fly off... I made myself a special overcoat for trips to work. It was made of thick red fabric with a high fur collar for cold weather.

At that time – in 1932-1933 – people dressed differently compared to how they dress nowadays. Working women would wear calico dresses in the summer and flannelette dresses in the winter. For weekend outings we tried our bests to make nicer-looking wool or silk garments. Simple stockings were for work; fil-de-Perse stockings – for socializing. These stockings endured endless darning. At that time Soviet people were poorer than after the war, and their lifestyle was more modest. Later Soviet lifestyle changed – partially because many Soviet people had gotten a chance to see the West and Western lifestyle.

Hence, I was studying and working to exhaustion. I put this incredible strain on myself because I wanted to achieve my goal. In the summer we finished our courses and started preparing for the exams. My parents went to the country with Valia and I stayed at home. One day I was out, and our apartment got burglarized. Burglars

took mostly clothes. Our apartment was in *bel-etage*, rear windows facing backyard, and right under those windows was the roof of a small barn. It was certainly easy to climb up to this roof and get into our rear windows.

I left for my exam wearing only a skirt and a short-sleeved blouse. When I returned, all my wardrobe was gone. Repairing this loss was not easy because of financial difficulties. Besides, consumer goods were hard to find in the Soviet Union. Shortage of consumer goods was the issue we had to deal with until our last day in the Soviet Union. Soviet economy functioned in such a way, that this problem could never be resolved.

After the burglary and the exams I joined my family in the country where I immediately got sick from overwork. Our attempts to get into college failed. Only Valia Afanasieva was accepted because of her peasant background.

MY WORK AND MY LIFE

I worked for The Seventh Factory for three and a half years. It was a good school of practical experience. There I had a chance to observe my designs printed and used to create produce. This helped to learn and work better.

I liked my factory and my job. In my free time I enjoyed playing volleyball and skiing. On weekends I frequently went skiing to Kavgholovo – a countryside township not far from the city. Then Mama convinced me to start looking for a different job in order to spend less time among workers. She thought that working class environment was bad for my intellectual development. I found a new place as a cold-metal-processing designer. There I worked among engineers. This organization – it was called *Projektzavodtrans* – was located not far from our home. There I did not have to be at work so early, and this was a great relief. Besides, *Projektzavodtrans* was subordinated to the Ministry of Railroad Transportation, and all employees were entitled to a free roundtrip pass anywhere in the country once a year. In all my years of work I used this pass only once, in 1935, to go through Moscow to Odessa for vacation. This was a very interesting trip. Of course, I could have gone to Crimea, or the Caucasus, but Mama thought that a young girl should not travel alone. «When you get married – go anywhere you want, but not until then», she used to say.

Once I visited friends who lived in Moscow area, and stayed there overnight. There I had a chance to observe the construction of Belomorkanal (White Sea Waterway). The majority of construction workers were prisoners and they looked horrible. They were exhausted and emaciated, hungry and dressed in dirty rags. In fact, they were nothing but slaves. Soviet propaganda of that time insisted that they were all criminals, dregs of society. Now we know that among them there were many intellectuals and highly educated people who had been convicted on false, hastily fabricated charges. These prisoners had no technology to work with and many of them succumbed to the strain of slave labor and perished.

I was working and my sister Valia was studying at a regular school and at the music school on Nekrasov Street. Mama was very busy and I attended parents' meetings and Valia's music school concerts instead of her. I also used to help Valia out with homework and kept track of her grades. We still had no piano, and Valia had to go to our friends' house for piano practice. I wanted to buy a piano for her. Mama made a suggestion: «Start putting your earnings in a savings

bank. When you accumulate enough money, we'll buy a piano». I followed her advice. I started spending less on myself and every payday I took money to a savings bank. After the murder of Kirov on December 1st, 1935, Leningrad was literally raped. Former clergy and other «hostile elements» were thrown out of the city. People were allowed only 24 to 48 hours for packing. They had to dispose of their belongings in a rush in order to vacate their dwellings. They tried to sell what they could. Ads about urgent sales of house ware, furniture and other objects were everywhere, on poles and on walls. I found an ad where, among other things, they were offering a piano. I did not understand at first why this piano was on sale and why it was so urgent. One evening Mama and I went to inspect the instrument.

The address was in Five Corners area. I was shocked by the expression of horror in the eyes of those people and by the dreadful mess in their apartment, and I begged Mama to leave. I could not – and I would not – build my happiness on other people's misfortune. On the other hand, now I believe, we would have done that family a favor had we bought the piano from them. Eventually, we did buy an instrument for Valia from a different family. Their son, a gifted child musician, needed a real concert piano, and his parents decided to sell the old instrument. I was happy to be able to do that for Valia: now she could practice any time she wanted.

I loved Valia with all my heart, like a mother. All my life I kept an eye on her and took care of her intellectual development. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. She paid me back with equal love and trust. If there was something she wanted to know – she trusted only me. Later she also developed an attachment to my husband Mark. He also used to spend a lot of time with her, helping her general development and education.

From the age of five she had many friends. At that age Mama found a private German daycare group for her. It was located on Vladimirskaja Square. I believe, at that time kindergartens did not exist yet – and if they did, it was too difficult to get in. In daycare Valia met Ania Kuslik, and they became friends for life. In the very first year of school she also made many friends. One of those friends was Nusia Levit. And in college she had many friends, too. All her friendships lasted until the end of her life. She had a precious gift for friendships that last decades, not years. I cannot recall Valia breaking up with her girlfriends or even casual acquaintances. She was always funny, merry and lively; she was fond of joking and entertaining others.

In 1935 Western dances, previously forbidden and condemned, came into fashion. Many clubs around the city started offering dancing classes where they taught tango, foxtrot, waltz-Boston, etc. These classes were not free, and still, young people went there to learn how to dance properly. I also joined one of dancing groups located on the corner of Liteinyi and Nevsky Avenue. We were studying different dances. On weekends several couples would gather in someone's house and practice. On December 1st I was planning to call and possibly meet one young man from the Petrograd Side. At home we had no telephone. Few of «mere mortals» had. High officials were the exception. I called him from a telephone booth. «What are you talking about? What dances? Don't you know that Kirov was murdered today?»

I was dumbfounded. I bought a newspaper and understood everything. The city was buzzing with anxiety. All conversations whirled around this terrible event. I must say that Kirov was very popular in Leningrad and the news of his murder spread like explosion. Everyone pitied him and condemned the murderers. No one, however, knew what was yet to come. There were rumors that Kirov had been shot by one Nikolaev, a Smolny employee. After Stalin's death new rumors spread, saying that Kirov's murder had been organized by Beria on Stalin's orders. Reportedly, Stalin envied Kirov's popularity.

Stalin chose to attend Kirov's funeral in person and among other things uttered two «memorable statements» addressed to people of Leningrad. The first statement was: «Since you failed to keep Sergey Mironovich Kirov alive, I will take his body to Moscow with me.» Straight from Tavricheskii Palace where the wake was organized Kirov's coffin was transported to the Moscow railroad terminal and sent to Moscow.

Stalin's second pronouncement was the following: «For one Kirov's head Leningrad will lose thousands». Truly enough, horrible terror ensued. Innocent people of all ages were being killed, arrested or exiled within 24 hours. Old people and infants, hungry and naked, all had to leave. They could only take carry-on things on the road. This was a real pogrom – the slaughter not of Jews, but of everyone who happened in the way. The city was terrified. No one knew what was going to happen the next day.

Persecutions lasted for a long time. I recall how on the day of the funeral representatives of all factories and organizations walked to Tavricheskii Palace to say good-bye to Kirov. Our organization rep-

representatives, including myself, had to walk from Ghoghol Street down Nevsky and Liteinyi to Tavricheskii Palace. We were close to the Palace when admission stopped and the body was taken to the railroad terminal. Many people remember these events well. They had heavy consequences for the future.



Sofa with her three best friends in school (Galia, Zoia, Valia).
1930, Leningrad



1933



1936



1940

MARRIAGE

About the same time – in 1937 – I met Mark Bekker, my soon-to-be husband, for the second time. I will explain how it happened. First time we met in 1935 when Sasha and I went to DETR (House of Engineers and Technical Workers) for a party. At some point Sasha went to the smoking room leaving me alone in the dance hall. A young man came up to me. He was of medium height with blonde hair and shining happy eyes. He invited me for a dance and I agreed. While dancing, he told me that he was a student of Japanese studies at the Institute of Oriental Sciences – and that he was very happy. He introduced me to his little brother Aaron. When Sasha returned, I went back to him. The other time in DETR Mark once again approached me and asked me for a dance. I refused. Then he asked: «Haven't we met already?» «No, I don't know you», I responded. I did, in fact, recognize him, but his appearance did not appeal to me. I preferred tall, dark-haired men, and he was smallish and blonde.

Our fates, however, decided differently. After this meeting in DETR in 1935 I did not see Mark for a long time. In 1937, a month before Passover, my parents were preparing to celebrate anniversary of their wedding. They did it every year for Purim and always invited their friends. Mr. and Mrs. Krivoruchko were also invited. As they were preparing to leave, a Mrs. Bekker came in. Mr. and Mrs. Krivoruchko used to tell us stories about her family of 10 siblings: 7 sons and 3 daughters. At the time of my narrative only one daughter was married. Two sons married Russian girls. Apparently, the Krivoruchko told them about our family as well. They invited her to join them and she gladly accepted. She said that one of her sons had to pick her up later to go yet to the other house, and that she needed to call him and tell him to come to our address. They all came to our house and Madam Bekker seemed to take a liking to me immediately. She was urging me to sit by her side and talk, and kept showing me photos of her children. I, however, could not concentrate on photographs – I had to help my mother. In addition, I was to entertain guests by singing while Valia accompanied me on the piano.

Soon a doorbell rang. I was in the far end of the hallway and Papa went to open the door. I looked – and recognized the blonde young man I met in DETR 2 years before. I was very surprised. He and his mother ended up canceling their plans and staying with us. Since that day we met daily, and exactly 2 months later we got married.

Every day I would look for excuses not to see Mark, and he

would meet me at the entrance of Orgmetal on Kirochnyi at the time I finished work. Thus, one guy was taking me to work, the other one saw me home.

I certainly had no plans to marry Mark. Until the last day I called him by name and patronymic, while he was on first name basis with me. He was a very stubborn person and he kept telling me that I had to become his wife anyway, and that resistance was futile. I responded by expressing my doubts and once again tried to avoid seeing him. I pretended that I was busy; that I had somewhere else to go – and so on. Mark soon realized that I was tricking him and he took the reins of our relationship in his own hands.

He was very tender and affectionate. Every day he saw me home after work and we stayed together until late at night. In our house he often met my other suitor. They took turns smoking in the hallway. (Mama did not allow smoking in the dining-room saying that it was bad for the drapes). As soon as one of them exited, the other one would ask me: «Why is he coming here? What is the purpose of his visits?» I responded with jokes.

Mark won me with his gentle and tender attitude. Every now and then he brought one of his brothers to meet me. Apparently, they all liked me. I was then a calm girl, friendly and gentle. By the end of March I went down with flu. Mark spent whole days at my bedside, giving me medicines and persuading me to marry him. Still I was cautious, for I hadn't known him long. On the other hand, Mama's sisters and their friends had known the Bekkers for a long time and even remembered their father who died in 1931. Everyone deemed this family good and honest.

Then I decided: I will accept Mark's proposal on April 1st. This way, if I change my mind, I'd say it was a prank. But prank it was not, and on April 29th we celebrated our wedding. And it was something I never came to regret about. I was not infatuated with Mark at the beginning, though I sensed that he was a good, decent man and a good husband-to-be. And I was right. Every day of our married life made me fall for him more and more. I was the girl who thought first and listened to her heart next, and I haven't changed since. Call it rationalism, but because of this trait in my character I always win in life. For example, I have never fallen in love with a person who was not in love with me. Therefore, my heart has never been broken; my feelings have always been shared.

In the period of courtship Mark was very respectful and never laid claims to my maidenhood. In those years having sex before the

wedding was considered shameful for the girl. Since we met every day, he had no sexual relationships with other women. Once he warned me that he was not coming the next day. Next day night he arrived anyway. After the wedding Mark told me that physiological need had lured him to a women's party, but women at the party disgusted him and he felt like a traitor. Around that time he wrote me a letter and passed it to me on one of our dates.

45 years and 9 months have passed since then – and I still have the letter. It survived evacuation, war and emigration. I treasure it so much that I want it to be part of my memoirs. In this letter Mark calls me «Sarrochka» as everyone in our family did. After the wedding he started calling me «Donichka» (an endearment from «donna»), and that later changed into «Dolichka». This name stayed with for life. I am so used to it that it caresses my ears like music.

« Leningrad, March 26, 1937

Dear Sarrochka, I've been up all night talking to you in my mind, trying to clarify all that remains obscure in our relationship. Now it is all clear to me. Under circumstances, I am in a difficult situation. Where and how should I go? This uncertainty would be less difficult to resolve if not for you. But you are now a part of me. I think more about you than about my future. I look at my future through your eyes. For me this is easy because I am certain about my wishes. You, Sarrochka, still hesitate, and this disorients me. Very soon a lot will depend on my ability to act. I will have to prove that my confidence is not a bubble; that I truly can «move mountains»; that I can accomplish more than I have accomplished so far. And you, Sarrochka, have to be my inspiration. That's what I learned from my long conversation with you tonight. Sarrochka, I am not like those young men who courted you before; I have nothing in common with them. I only met them when I first met you – by sheer chance. If there was a «common» moment between me and them, it allowed me to find you, and nothing else. It was short and for me it is past and gone. I also know that everyone who have met you have attempted to stay with you – each in his own manner. If destiny has joined us, I'd like to stay by your side; to build our future together. Sarrochka, I told you once that I am in love with you. I pronounced those sacred words only once and, believe me, dear Sarrochka, the real value of the word «love» is not in the number of times you repeat it, but it is made of deep, heartfelt respect, real intimacy and understanding. It is unity of desires that makes this feeling really special and profound. Sarrochka, I have nothing to do with the bourgeois understanding of this word. I cannot

give you all the trumps of bourgeois wealth, but I have the right to say «love» because I know the essence and power of this word. I love you sincerely. I think that you are above that bourgeois custom that makes personal happiness depend on the will of the third party. Our own happiness and your beautiful, happy future have to be created by our own hands. At present, Sarrochka, I cannot give you wealth. I have nothing. Should that destroy our feelings and push us apart? Allow me to believe, Sarrochka, that you love me entirely, with all my pitfalls, – and you will become the happiest woman on earth! No one will ever rebuke us. Allow me to be loved and happy! I am writing these words – and my feeling for you burns anew! I am all joy, all happiness, I love and I believe that I am loved! Sarrochka, the higher I fly in my thoughts, the happier I feel, the more I believe in myself. Believe me, when I see your happiness, my own happiness will double! I have to stop myself now: if I continue writing, I may turn profane and lose touch with reality. Happiness is good when it is here and now. I want to see and feel it. I am in a rush to finish this letter and give it to you. Of course, I'll have to wait a long time until five, and then... No, this cannot be! I do not believe them! You have to be the kind of girl I see and imagine! I am not writing now – I am talking to you. You are here, on my left, sitting on the sofa and nodding your head. You think exactly the way I do; you also want us to love each other and be happy. Sarrochka, I can hear you say «yes!»

Kisses, your Mark

P. S. Sarrochka, my silly girl, I want you all, and I am looking forward to the moment when I will say: «I am yours and you are mine!»
Love you, Mark

Sarrochka, I am happy!
I will be twice as happy
When today at your place
we shall raise our glasses
and announce our happiness!
May our joy illuminate the hearts
of our friends and family.
They will raise their glasses
and drink to our joy and future happiness!
We do not shun new roads.
Life has hardened us.
Love will give us strength!
We'll overcome!
Fortunes welcome me.

*Thorns are forgotten.
My thorny past
gives me strength
to fight for happiness – and to win.*

Mark »

I was a very obedient daughter. Mama was strict, and I was soft and compliant. Because of this I almost lost my life's happiness. This is how it happened.

Mama always expected me to be home by midnight. Once, when Mark was already my fiancé, we went to a party and missed this «deadline». In the morning Mama told me: «He is not a member of my family yet – and he already breaks my rules. I do not want to see him in my house again.»

Mark, in the meantime, was about to come over. I told Valia: «Go outside, meet him and tell him that he cannot see me any more». Valia was only 14. She was very attached to Mark; she liked him and respected him. Mark used to help her with homework and always patiently explained parts she struggled to understand. He treated her as his own sister. When Valia heard my words, she dropped to her knees and begged Mama to forgive Mark until our mother succumbed.

I told Mark that I agree to marry him, and he decided to make an official visit to my primary guardian – i.e. my mother. One night this visit took place. I was still young and inexperienced, and yet this conversation made a bad impression on me. Mama subjected Mark to a kind of interrogation, asking him questions like – «Have you ever been married before? Are you paying child support?» – and so on. He patiently answered all her questions. Later, when my parents finally accepted him as my official fiancé, he asked for their permission to call them «Mama» and «Papa». «What is that for?» Mama retorted. «Your mother is alive. You have no father though, so go ahead and call M. S. «papa' if you want». I sensed the wrongness of her answer. I think, if sons or daughters-in-law call their mother-in-law «mama», this should be accepted as an honor and a sign of great respect.

Nevertheless, Mark started calling my parents «mama» and «papa» and he treated them as his birth parents.

Because of that, I also had to call Mark's mother «mama». Before marriage I could not imagine calling a strange woman «mama», but as soon as I came to know her it started coming naturally. I will talk about her in more detail later: my mother-in-law deserves it.

When we were already married, I asked Mama why she had been so stern with Mark. She said, it was certainly wrong of her, and that it was her first experience of giving one of her daughters away.

In those days people liked to celebrate their weddings in May 1st. But my choice was April 29th. I will explain why. I did not want to be married in May because folk wisdom says: «Those who marry in May spend their lives in dismay». In 1937 May 1st fell on Monday and April 30th was a Sunday, a holiday. Back then people still had to work on Saturdays. Getting married on Sunday would not help: I knew that weddings last through the night and therefore we'd end up in May anyway. Hence, I set our wedding for April 29.

We decided to organize a reception in our 2-room apartment in Kuznechnyi Lane. Around 50 friends and relatives were invited. It took Mama and her helpers – sisters and friends – several days to prepare for the feast. Mark's and mine participation was not required. «Go walk around», Mama said, «and drop by the civil acts registry office, if you would. It is pre-holiday time; the office may be busy.»

Unfortunately marriage registration in those days was conducted in a rather casual way. We walked out onto Nevsky Avenue and headed for our local registry office whose headquarters were in the former palace. A woman employee asked if she could help us. We said that we wanted to register our marital union. «Wait a bit», she said, «I need to finish processing papers for the man who just died.»

Nice, isn't it? We waited. She finished her business, registered our marriage and did not even think of congratulating us. This, officially we were married on April 26, 1937. We walked back out onto Nevsky. The day was warm and sunny, and we started off in the direction of the Admiralty. By the Leningrad House of Trade we ran into Mark's brother Senya and his bike. He asked where we'd been and, learning that we'd just registered our marriage, congratulated us and invited us to his house on Lesnoi Prospect. We accepted. This was my very first visit to Mark's place.

Then he took me home and afterwards went back to his place. On the 29th over 50 guests came over, most of them family members and friends of parents. No room was left for young people, our own friends. A small table for the bride and the groom was put in between the two rooms, in the doorway, so that no guests get offended. Someone – I do not recall who – offered to make Chupa for us. We did not object. Papa went to the synagogue, invited the Rabbis and they did everything according to the ritual. This, however, was accompanied by one unpleasant episode.

In 1937 Chupa celebration in Leningrad could be dangerous,

even though there were no Party members in our family. Therefore, my mother told the Rabbis that the groom was a Party member and therefore everything had to be done as swiftly as possible. The Rabbis arrived, but Mark's relatives were not there yet and we could not start without them. Agitated, I told Mark: «What a nuisance! It is time to start – and they are running late!» He answered in a serious metallic voice: «Dolichka, I beg you not to speak of my relatives this way!» I said nothing, but a thought flashed across my mind: «Maybe I should recall the ceremony and the wedding? He is not my husband yet, and he is already scolding me!»

Besides, my girlfriends and cousins had been warning me: «Aren't you afraid to marry into such a large family? They will interfere in your life with Mark! They may spoil your life!» To this I used to respond that I found it interesting being a member of a large family. At that time all members of this family were young, healthy, friendly and good-natured, and from the very first day they accepted me as one of their own. I was treated with love and respect. And no one ever interfered in our private affairs; no one ever insulted or badmouthed me.

At that crucial moment before Chupa I kept my mouth shut and said nothing. Soon everyone arrived and the ceremony of betrothal started. It was so touching that I could not help crying. Those were tears of affection and love for Papa who always treated me as his own flesh and blood. No one knew that he was my stepfather.

There was one more interesting episode at our wedding. When the Bekkers arrived, my mother noticed Olia, Mark's sister, and asked him: «Who is this shiksa?» She knew that two of his brothers, Senya and Sasha, had Russian wives. «Mama, this is my sister!» he said. Olia did, in fact, look like a Russian girl. Also, there were 2 pregnant young women at our wedding. One was Valia, Mark's younger brother Sasha's wife. She was 6 months pregnant and gave birth to son George in September. The other one was my cousin Tania, Aunt Sonia's daughter. She gave birth to son Edward also in September.

Mark's older brother Arkadiy and his wife Kettie also came to our wedding from Moscow where they registered their marriage on the same day with us. It was nice to have them.

Our wedding kept going until dawn. It was merry and carefree, and that night Mark stayed with us as my husband. On May 1st our entire family went to visit my cousin Tania and her husband Joseph for their 6th wedding anniversary. The next day Mark and I, Arkadiy and Kettie and Senya with Liuba (Mark's third brother and his wife) took a train to the suburb of Pushkino and spent a day there. I still have a picture of us from that day in my photo album.



Wedding photo. 4.26.1937. Leningrad, Russia.



**Arkadiy, Senya and Mark with wives
in Pushkin – Leningrad (St-Petersburg).**