

## MARK AND HIS FAMILY

Mark – the fourth boy was born in 1908 – is very much like his brothers both in character and appearance. On the other hand, he is very different.

His main distinguishing features are: his love for knowledge – any kind of knowledge, his extensive erudition and his unusual personality in which strong will and gentleness go together. He had his share of difficult days, and even years, but he hasn't lost his buoyant spirit, optimism and kindness. I think, these words are especially valuable when they come from a man's wife who spent 47 years by his side. Many times Mark rose fairly high – and then fell. Still, obstacles did not embitter him; did not deprive him of his good qualities. This is probably why he is now climbing up again.

Mark grew up in a large religious family of 10 siblings. Children in his family were on good terms with each other, never argued or fought as boys frequently do. Age difference between the 7 boys was from a year to a year and a half. Certainly, parents were the ones who created such a good climate in the family. Child-parent relationships in this family were friendly and tender – which was very important for children.

From early childhood Mark was eager to learn. When he was 5, his father took him to kheder – a Jewish school where they teach prayers and laws. There he studied for 2 years. Then he entered junior preparatory school at gymnasium. After the October revolution all gymnasiums were closed, and Soviet labor schools were opened instead. Mark was accepted into the third grade. It was a Jewish school. Jewish schools existed for several years after the revolution. Then they were closed. The school was very good. All teachers were highly educated specialists who had previously taught in gymnasiums. They left an important trace in the memory of their students. Even now, in his old age, Mark frequently recalls them. He was always a good, eager student. He was socially active, eloquent, smart and intellectually mature. But his parents were considered «non-working elements», and in 1923-24 this category of population had to pay for their children's education. Many years passed before education in the Soviet Union became free. Mark's father did not have enough money to pay, therefore older children stopped studying and started working, while Mark's younger siblings were expelled from school and had nowhere to study.

Mark was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade then. Every now and then school principal would come into class and expel him for failing to pay the fee

– and every time, as soon as the principal left, Mark would return. This is how thirsty he was for knowledge. This way he completed 7 years of middle school. He graduated in 1927. School students also studied at the Jewish craft industry shop sponsored by The Joint – the American society for the support of the Jews.

After school Mark endured every ordeal possible to continue his education. To me it looks like he did not care where and what he'd study: he just wanted to study. He entered Odessa Artillery School, but 3 months later was expelled as the son of «a non-working element». His father had a license for small dye-house trade in Moscow, but someone reported him to school authorities as a clandestine manufacturer and owner of residential buildings and stores. Artillery School officials made no attempt to verify this information. It was easier for them to expel the student. Mark took this incident very hard. Still, he had to go on. He found a place of a deck-hand on a passenger steamboat called «Pestel» that cruised between Odessa and Batoumi. Mark's duty was to scrub the deck and to clean 3<sup>rd</sup> class cabins.

There was an agreement that for testing purposes Mark will not be paid for first two trips, and then will start getting regular wages. On his 3<sup>rd</sup> trip he still received nothing. Seeing this, he left the steamboat in Batoumi and started looking for a job there. He found nothing and took off to Tbilisi planning to find a woman and a girl he had befriended on the steamboat. They were out of town. Mark checked into a tourist campground for lodging and went to work at a brick factory as clay-sifter.

Unemployment in those years was very high and people had to take every job they could find. Kneading clay with one's feet was physically hard and exhausting. By Mark's sides there were Aisors – Christian Assyrians – who spoke no Russian. Team supervisor cheated them out of their money by paying them considerably less than the others. They begged Mark to protect their interests. After a few conversations with Mark, team supervisor offered him to get lost if he did not want a knife in his back. Mark left – and went to Baku. A guy on the steamboat told him that in Baku they were hiring workers for refrigeration plant construction. In Baku it turned out that all vacancies at the construction site had been already filled. Mark dropped by a synagogue hoping to meet Jewish acquaintances. There were none.

Mark cruised almost the entire territory of the Soviet Union, moving from one republic to the other, trying to make sense of his own life, looking at the lives of others, exploring places of interest

and constantly searching for ways to get across «to the other side» and to join his brother Grisha in Shanghai. He had come to realize that in the Soviet Union he'd never be able to lead a normal life because of his social background.

Interestingly, as a schoolboy he was an enthusiastic member of Young Pioneers' League and an atheist. At some point he had a rupture with his father because of this. They were sitting down to a Shabbat dinner when Mark said that he had to step on duty at this Young pioneers' Club. His father forbade him to leave. When Mark disobeyed, he told him not to come back home. So, Mark spent the night at his friend Iliusha Srybnyk's house. There he felt at home. Besides, he was courting Iliusha's sister Lisa.

In 1927 Mark came to Moscow from Tashkent. His father wired him money for the road. Arkadiy's friend arranged for Mark to work for MOGHES laying down electric cables. Once fellow workers forced Mark to participate in a lunch-break drinking party. Vodka did nothing to other workers: they were used to it, but Mark got drunk after the second glass. Fearing to scald himself with hot mastic, he asked their supervisor to let him go home. The supervisor got mad, slapped Mark «for drinking in his workplace» and ordered him to go work. Mark left without his permission. He got home safely, lay down and sank into oblivion. Arkadiy rebuked him for that. This was the end of Mark's career at MOGHES.

At the same time Mark was exchanging letters with Grisha and kept looking into ways of reaching Shanghai. Arkadiy introduced him to a young Moscovite whose relatives were living in Paris, so that young man wanted to join them. In the winter of 1927-28 the two of them took a train to Blagovetsensk. There they met Grisha's contact who was supposed to assist them in crossing the border.

Mark's partner was the one who financed this enterprise. Grisha's contact was a barber in a public bathhouse. He introduced them to a smuggler who frequently crossed the border himself and for a certain sum was ready to take people across. Back then it was still possible. One winter night, at dusk, the three of them started across the Zeia river at the place where it flows into the Amour. As they reached the middle of the frozen river, they changed their direction and started walking along the Amour towards the Chinese side. Unfortunately, they were spotted from a border outpost and a mounted trooper started galloping in their direction. They burst into running on porous ice, but it was too late: the trooper started shooting. They had to drop face down on the ice. They were captured and brought

back to Blagovescensk, to border patrol headquarters. There they were searched. Soldiers took their identification papers and money. During the interrogation they claimed that they had intended to smuggle goods from China – and the officials believed them. They were ordered to go to the town of Tomsk. Officials provided them with papers and money for tickets to Tomsk. Mark's partner called his parents in Moscow and asked them to wire him extra money. Convinced that no one will send him money anyway, Mark left for Tomsk.

Later he learned that his partner's parents had contacted Arkadiy, and that Arkadiy, in fact, did wire him the money which came back to him for the absence of the addressee.

Unable to find employment in Tomsk, Mark hitchhiked to Moscow and joined his father and Arkadiy who were by then business partners. Mark worked for them as a cashier and an accounting clerk. They purchased clothing items in Moscow coop stores – and sold them in other cities. Soviet consumer industry was still in a bad shape. Moscow was the only place where one could find anything at all.

In early 1928 Arkadiy's girlfriend from Odessa arrived to Moscow. She was his friend Sergey's sister and a ballerina of The Odessa Opera House. Arkadiy rented a dacha for her and dispatched Mark «to be at her service». Soon Mark was fed up with this role. He was also mad at Arkadiy for his previous treatment of Mark's friend Zhenya – the object of his affections and even matrimonial plans. Thus, Mark returned the money he had in his keep to Arkadiy and announced that he was leaving. All this happened because Mark had no identification papers. His papers were confiscated in Blagovescensk. And without papers he could not find official employment.

He stayed in Moscow for a while, and then went to Odessa to visit his mother. She still had the old birth certificate of Mark's brother who was born a year before Mark and died in infancy. «Mark» was actually the name of that boy, while Mark's real name before 1928 was «Lazar». Thus, Mark took his late brother's papers and turned from Lazar' Bekker, born in 1909, to Mark Bekker, born in 1908. To his friends and acquaintances he explained that by the Jewish custom he had two first names: Leizer-Mordekhai, and that he had simply decided to adapt his second name to a more sonorous «Mark». Soviet Jews frequently russified their names to ease communication with the majority.

From Odessa Mark once again went to Batoumi hoping to cross

the border into Turkey. He found himself a job mixing concrete at a factory in the village of Gukva, not far from Batoumi. Soon he discovered that Batoumi presented no opportunities for crossing the border. then he moved on to investigate Baku and Caspian sea-route connection with Iran. But he had no money to pay the smugglers for the passage, and this door remained closed too. Next he went to Turkmenistan, to the town of Aschhabad, and tried to pursue his goal there – only to discover once again that without money he could do nothing.

In 1932, when Mark was in the army and worked at Kalashnikov marina in Leningrad, he was approved for the status of Communist Party membership candidate. Half a year later he joined the Party. In September 1933 he was offered to stay in the army in exchange for a rank of lieutenant and tank brigade commander. Mark did not say «yes» – but military command kept him in the army 4 extra months, hoping that he would accept their offer. Mark was demobilized in January 1934. He came to regional Party committee to register in the local Party unit. Party officials looked into his army record and saw that he knew English, that he had been granted a permission to sail in foreign waters; that he had excelled in military command training and that he had an offer to become a military officer. Impressed, they offered him to enter the specialized Japanese studies faculty at the Institute for Oriental Studies. Mark accepted. He already had credits from 4 years of college, and this was exactly what they required at the specialized faculty, for their students had to be college seniors or college graduates.

It took two months to screen Mark «for political, social and moral fitness», and in March of 1934 he began his studies. He was one of the best students, and a year later he was transferred to the group of last-year students. He studied hard himself and helped those who fell behind. He lived in the dormitory. In the summer all students had to go to a camp because this faculty was affiliated to the military. Mark was one of the ten best faculty graduates. As a «good conversationalist», he was assigned to Vneshtorg (Foreign Trade Department) for working in Japan. This was in July 1935.

Japan, however, was not to be. His destiny took another unexpected turn. While Mark's papers for the trip to Japan were being processed, the entire group of graduates was sent to a sanatorium in Crimea. On his way back Mark stopped for a few days in Odessa to see his childhood and youth friends. His first visit was to the Srybnik family. By then Lisa Srybnik, his first love, was married and had two

kids. her husband was a chairman of the department of politics in a large Soviet collective farm. When they saw each other, Lisa and Mark exchanged warm kisses – and this made her husband jealous. He took revenge on Mark by reporting him to the regional Party Committee: this form of settling personal grudges used to be very popular among Soviet people. In his letter he wrote that Mark's father was a big merchant and owner of houses and stores. It was never true, but back then truth interested no one and even anonymous letters were considered a credible source of information. As soon as Mark returned to Leningrad, he was called to the Party Committee where they informed him that his Party membership had to be revoked because of Mark's social background. Mark told them that his father died in 1931, even showed his death certificate. He also offered to accompany Committee representatives to the cemetery and demonstrate his father's grave. Nothing worked: it was much simpler for Party Committee employees to just void Mark's membership in the Party. Non-Party members were not allowed to perform the kind of work he had studied for. In addition, Mark did not have his diploma yet: diplomas were to be handed out after the trip to Japan. In the end, instead of his diploma, Mark received a certificate that he had «listened to the course of lectures at the Institute of Oriental Studies».

This was a big disaster. He rose so high – only to fall back to the very bottom. If not for Mark's youth, good health and optimistic nature, he would not have survived. But he had to go on living – and working. He went from one «responsible organization» to the other begging at least to let him go to the Russian Far East – to teach Japanese at school. This request was also rejected. There was no work for him in Leningrad, so he decided to try his luck in Moscow.

He came to the personnel office of the Likhachev automobile plant and was hired as manual worker to the transport department. By sheer chance he met Grigoriy Dvorkin, Betia's future husband, who was head of the transport department. Dvorkin arranged Mark's transfer to the planning and technology group. A year and a half Mark worked there, renting a place in the room from his acquaintances, for he had no residential status in Moscow. Exhausted by this way of life, he returned to Leningrad where arrests and executions related to the murder of Kirov had already ceased.

On April 29, 1937, we got married and started our life together. For a while Mark worked somewhere as supply manager, but he soon resigned and started looking for something new. To me his inability to hold one job for a long time seemed weird. From 1937 to 1941 he

changed several jobs. In effect, he had no profession. Having studied for many years in very different colleges, he could not stop wandering. I suggested that he should go somewhere to study and get a useful profession. This, however, was difficult to arrange. To enter college one had to have school-leaving certificate – and Mark had none. Neither could he show his certificate from the institute for Oriental Studies, because studying in two colleges was prohibited.

Then we decided that he had to pass final school exams and get a high school diploma. I accompanied him to one of the exams to help him write a composition. The exam was held in a school building on Fontanka Embankment. Our idea did not work out, and I do not remember why. Probably, because Mark had to leave for his summer military training camp.

Earlier I wrote how Mark had to leave to that camp 18 days into our marriage. When he finally returned, we took leaves and went to Borovichi where my mother and Valia lived in a rented country house. There was no end to our happiness. We were together once again. We were enjoying nature, relaxing, strolling around, making love... Mark could not sit still when I was near. We had wonderful time.

We worked hard, saved some money and in the summer of 1939 we went to Crimea and then to the Caucasus. I had never been there before. In those years a trip to the South was everyone's greatest dream – and we made it a reality. First we went to Moscow. It was very nice there also. We bought a new FED camera, the best available back then, and this was also a big event. We used this camera for many years; took it into emigration and sold it in Rome. All our Soviet photographs that fill four albums are made with this camera.

We had a sleeping compartment when we took a train to Crimea. First we had to stay in different compartments, for tickets for every kind of transport were hard to get in the Soviet Union. We had a funny episode because of this: I went to look for Mark and thought that I saw him on the upper berth. I alerted him – and it was not Mark. It was Sholokhov, the writer, who was traveling with his family to his native village. He looked amazingly like Mark: same height, same hair, same complexion.

In Crimea we saw all places of interest and had a wonderful time. My mother and sister, accompanied by mother's friend and her son, also traveled there that summer. Having spent a fortnight in Crimea, we decided to take a steamboat to Sochi and see the Caucasus. Not surprisingly, tickets for the boat were hard to get.

Mark only managed to get us tickets to sleep on the deck – and off we went, hoping to wriggle out of this situation. What followed sounds like a joke. Mark went to our captain's assistant and asked for a bed for me. He said that I was pregnant. So I was forced to thrust out my belly and feign pregnancy. Captain's assistant gave me a berth in a compartment, and before that I slept on a sofa in someone's office. Then Mark also got a bed. When we were leaving the ship in Sochi, he wished us to have a son and asked to name him «Kol'ka». In the Caucasus it took us a week to cruise around nearest resorts and to see all places of interest. Finding a room for rent was a problem; finding food was even bigger problem. this ubiquitous phenomenon makes people in the Soviet union jumpy and bad-tempered.

The mysterious murder of Kirov, member of Political Bureau and First Secretary of Regional Party Committee, was followed by mass arrests and persecution aimed first at important Party officials, and then – at all «unwanted elements», such as former aristocrats, clergy, merchantry, people of foreign origin et cetera. It was also a good moment to get rid of old Bolsheviks who had their own opinions of everything and had had the experience of membership in other political parties. Many directors of various organizations were subjected to scrutiny and replaced. The same happened to those university professors and students who had ever had or voiced their thoughts. Black cars nicknamed «black ravens» cruised the city every night, and sometimes during the day, taking prisoners to the KGB building on Liteinyi Avenue or to prisons. Not a single person felt safe.

The Institute for Oriental Studies was closed and thoroughly obliterated. Its director and a number of professors were shot as «people's enemies». Similar fate befall professors of foreign origin who had escaped to the USSR from their governments. Army commander Blukher and other military commanders, including their interpreters – former students of the Oriental Institute, perished in the Far East. This wave of terror lasted until 1938. Thus, Mark was lucky to be kicked out of the Party: otherwise he would have been shot like the others.

While Mark lived and worked in Moscow, his mother in Leningrad kept receiving numerous notices ordering him to present himself to KGB. Those who expelled Mark from the Party, Lisa's husband, the author of the anonymous letter, and many others were devoured by this giant «meat-grinder». Even now, remembering that period, I shiver.



A short Soviet-Finnish war lasted only four months in the winter season of 1940. Mark volunteered to the army. It was considered «cool» back then. He served as a lieutenant in a motorized infantry regiment. The winter was cold: temperatures regularly fell down to 40 below zero Centigrade, and many soldiers got frost bites or perished. I kept working At The Red Dawn during the day, and was busy feeling blue for my husband at nights. Leningrad was in total black-out, so it was not easy to go anywhere. I was sitting at home, waiting for Mark to come home or call. Sometimes they sent him on business trips to Leningrad.

Once he came to the area close to Krasnaia Street where my cousin Tania, Aunt Sonia's daughter, lived with her family. Mark called, and I went there because he had no time to get home. When I came in, he was drinking hot tea, red in his face from the cold. He fell asleep in the mid-word, with a mug in his hand. This is how exhausted he was. Finns are wonderful sharp-shooters. Their tactics was to shoot where no one expected them. Entering Finnish villages and towns, Soviet troops found nothing but empty houses and not a single human in the streets. And Mannerheim's defense lines were tough and unbreakable. Still, peace was made, and in April, 1940, the war ended. Volunteers were demobilized in the first place by a special order and Mark came home. We were together and once gain happy.

We celebrated our 3<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary during May holidays. As all our anniversary parties, this celebration was sumptuous and crowded. Our family always considered wedding anniversary the biggest holiday of all. Mark's mother had a wall rug I fancied. She promised to give it to me when Mark returns. And she did give it to me for our 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary – and it stayed with us for life. Rugs of this kind were a rarity then.

While Mark was still in the army, we had an unpleasant incident at home. Valia, who was then in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, put on my husband's suit, overcoat and fur hat; then quietly stepped out of the apartment and rang the doorbell two times as Mark always did. I jumped up and ran for the door. When I realized that it was Valia's prank, I turned around and went into my room. She followed me and started clowning, trying to make me laugh. I gently pushed her away: «Leave me alone» – but she tripped over Mark's long pants, fell on the rug – and suddenly screamed. She broke her leg. Fortunately, her childhood friend Ania Kuslik and her family lived in the house next to us. Ania's father was a medical professor of orthopedics. He came over and put

her leg in cast. Because of the black-out getting to the hospital was a problem. And this is how Valia's unhappy prank ended.

After the war Mark immediately got a free pass to «Arkhipo-Osipovka» sanatorium in the Caucasus. We bought another pass for me and went for a vacation. Once again we stopped in Moscow and once again had a good time there. Arkadiy already had a son – Rafa – and we bought him a newly released pedal-propelled car for kids. Later he passed this car to our son, and he liked riding it. We were very much into photography and made many shots of our stays in Moscow and in the South.

When we returned home and started working, everything seemed all too bright and clear. As my mother said, fat life was driving us crazy. It was time to think about a baby. I came to the same conclusion. Mark loved me, I was sure of that, and we were getting along just fine. Thus, we stopped using contraceptives. It took me 4 long months to get pregnant. I was worrying: in my understanding it had to have happened immediately... When we achieved the desired outcome, I started dreaming about a son. First I wanted a boy and then – a girl. In fact, it turned out the opposite way.



1928

Mark before the Great  
Patriotic War in Russia,  
1941 - 1945



1939



1940



After the war, 1947.



**Sasha, Mark, Lev, Aron, and Senya returning from the Great Patriotic War in Russia.**



**Mark and Sofa during the war.**

## **BIRTH OF OUR DAUGHTER INNA THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR 1941–1945**

During my first pregnancy I kept on working as a designer at The Red Dawn factory. I had no complications and I looked just fine: nothing was protruding. I simply looked round and plump. My face was clear and fresh, free of pigment spots. At work no one suspected that I was pregnant. Of course, I did order a pregnancy dress from a good tailor. Everyone fancied crepe de chine then, so I asked for a low-necked brown crepe de chine sun-frock with 2-3 rows of elastic on the sides. Under this sun-frock I would wear nice light-colored blouses with flounces to cover my belly, and on top – a coat made of the same fabric with white silk lining, straight cut, with long sleeves and a standing collar with long ends in the front to tie a ribbon. The coat and the sun-frock were the same length.

It was nice attire and it concealed my condition well. I was wearing it to work, to parties, to the theater etc. Even my physicians could not believe that I was expecting so soon. Also, women often deceived them deliberately. Maternity leave in those days had to start a month before the baby was expected and end a month after. For me, however, it started as late as two weeks before my deadline. I worked until I was 8.5 months into the pregnancy. Approximately 2 months before that my design office acquired new designer boards, so-called *kulmans*, to replace old-type horizontal boards that had to lye on the table on props. They could stand vertically and had special stools in front of them. I was invited to use one of those boards. A conservative by nature, I refused to give up my old table. But the more my belly grew – the harder it was to sit there. I had to stand up and stretch every now and then. Alexander Ivanovich Orlov, our head of department, father of two children, noticed my maneuvers. It was only then that he understood that I was pregnant.

Once I stood up to stretch and he looked at me with understanding. Then I said: «Alexander Ivanovich, now I'd like to sit at the kulman». He asked if someone wanted to exchange places with me. And I moved to the kulman by the window. From this window I could observe military barracks. Every day there were new parties of soldiers there; every day crowds of mothers, wives, sisters and so on gathered around barracks. These scenes depressed and surprised me. I did not know that new soldiers were conscripted because the country was preparing for the war.

I often wept from fear of dying when I was alone. I tried to con-

ceal my tears from others. Mark noticed my black mood and started asking questions. I answered nothing. Once, when we were already in bed, he kept questioning me until 3 a. m. He said, he would not be able to sleep if I do not tell him. Finally I gave up and told him that I was afraid of dying in childbirth and so on. He woke up my parents, told them about my fears and everyone started reassuring me.

In the morning Mama called my Aunt Fira who was assisting her during my birth. Aunt Fira was a professional midwife and she worked for the Ministry of Healthcare. She assured me that «we shall be together» and – even though Pediatric Institute nearby had a maternity ward – made arrangements to check me into Otto's Clinic, one of the best establishments in Leningrad. I did not want to go there, because two years before Mark's sister Olia was giving birth to her first daughter at Otto's Clinic and almost died from blood infection.

My weeping fits during pregnancy may have been induced by a forefeeling of the impending global disaster. And the disaster arrived: on June 22, 1941, The Great Patriotic War broke out. When I was in my seventh months, Mark was unexpectedly sent to his military camp for annual training. There was nothing unusual in the fact itself, except that normally he'd go there during the summer for two months, and this time he went in the spring for 3 months – from March 27 to June 27.

I missed him very much, but we were all patriots and believed that patriotic duty had to stand above everything else. This was the worst time to be deprived of tender attention of a loving husband. Everyone knows that a pregnant woman is especially needy and vulnerable. I kept working, and I moved in with my parents and sister. This helped to heighten my spirits a bit. Besides, I was young and healthy. In fact, before 60 I rarely had anything more serious than winter flu, and checked to the hospital only for childbirth. I was tidy, practical and took pleasure in managing the house. Therefore, when my maternity leave finally came through, I busied myself with cleaning up our room and putting our meager possessions in order. I sprinkled our winter clothes with moth-balls and put them away into the box under the sofa. For every good housewife it was a thing to do in the spring. It took the entire day on June 10<sup>th</sup>. I had to bend down, fold up every piece of cloth, sprinkle it with moth-balls, then straighten up and go for the next item. By dusk Mama urged me to go outside and walk around in papa's company in order to get a gulp of fresh air.

Papa and I started walking down Lesnoi arm in arm. As we reached a closed bread stall, Papa saw a makeweight piece of bread in front of the stall. Someone must have dropped it. (Back then bread was still sold by weight.) Papa left me, bent down, picked the bread up, cleaned it off and put it on the stall counter. «Papa, aren't you ashamed to pick bread from the ground?» I asked him when he returned. «Dear girl, you know nothing about hunger», he said. «One cannot throw bread on the ground».

Very soon after that incident I learned very well what hunger was like. It was during wartime Blockade of Leningrad when I had to survive there with a nursing infant. But I will talk about this later.

By 7 a. m. the next day I went into labor. Mama called a taxi and took me to the other part of the city – to Vasilievsky Island, I think. There they told us that they were closing for renovation, and that they do not admit any more women in childbirth. Mama called Aunt Fira and an ambulance took me to Otto's Clinic. There attitude of medical personnel was very different. To accomplish anything at all in the Soviet Union one has to know the right people. That's how it was – and that's how it still is. In early years, however, they did not ask for money, while later one had to give clandestine bribes for proper medical care. I was in great pain. Then they gave me a shot which sent me into slumber for a few hours. Finally, at 4:40 in the afternoon, I gave birth to a daughter. The day was Wednesday, June 11, 1941.

I looked up, saw a girl and cried out: «Take her away!» I wanted my first baby to be a boy. Through the entire pregnancy I kept talking about this boy and choosing names for him.

My child made not a sound when it arrived into this world. She did not scream as newborns usually do. Medical team members took two bowls. One contained hot water, the other – cold. They lifted my baby by her legs, head down, and started dipping her into hot and cold water. This went on for 20 minutes. The baby grimaced, but made no sound. She was all blue and skinny. Her weight at birth was as little as 3 kg 60 g. At 5 o'clock precisely the baby screamed. I know because I was looking at the face of the clock on the wall. At that moment I was not aware that my baby was in danger. I thought, it was a regular procedure. Finally, they wrapped the baby and took her away.

Then they started stitching me up. There was no anesthesia and I was in terrible pain. I was screaming on the top of my voice. At that time my mother returned home, entered her bedroom, positioned herself in front of two portraits of her parents that were hanging on the

wall over the bed – and started praying out loud. At times of crisis she always turned to her dead parents and talked to them like religious people would talk to God. She was begging them to think about me and to grant me swift, painless and happy childbirth.

In the other room my sister Valia was preparing for her high school finals together with a few boys and girls from her class. She thought that no one else was at home. Suddenly she heard someone talking in Mama's room. She opened the door to her bedroom – and saw Mama standing on her knees and talking to her parents' portraits.

The next day Mama sent Mark a congratulatory telegram where she informed him about the birth of his daughter.

When he learned that he had become a father, Mark begged his military commanders to give him a short-term leave. He went from one commander to the other. Everyone refused to oblige him. Finally, the highest in command succumbed to Mark's pressure and allowed him to leave for 5 days. Mark arrived to Leningrad on June 17. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> he had to go back to his military unit. I was released from the hospital on the 18<sup>th</sup>. By my arrival Mark filled our entire room with flowers. He came for me in a car, and the car was also wrapped in flowers, starting from the roof. He and Mama came together and brought me and our girl home. We were all blissfully happy. The girl lost some weight in the hospital – but she was still very pretty.

That very night Valia had her graduation ball at school. She was already 18 and very attractive. Boys always were around in our house. Her main suitor was a boy named Monya from a parallel class. I do not remember his last name.

My pregnancy and childbirth took everyone's attention away from Valia. She did not even have a ball gown. Graduation parties back then were not as big events as they are now. Valia asked me if she could borrow my wedding gown – and I said «yes», of course. She and I were approximately the same size. My wedding gown was beautiful and well-made. It was made of beige *crepe Georgette* strewn with artificial flowers. White gowns for brides came into fashion later.

Mark's 5 free days flew by like a dream. When he told me how much effort this leave had cost him, I said something in a sense that maybe it was not worth it, because in another 5 days he was supposed to be home for good. «Had they allowed me to go for just 5 hours – I would have come to see you anyway, because of the current situation», he responded. I was flattered, but the meaning of these words remained veiled for me. When the war started, Mark explained it bet-



ter. He said that his commanders did not want to give him a leave because it was clear by then that war was about to start any minute. High standing officers told him that, and even hinted that the cadets may have to pass their exams on the battlefield. He served as lieutenant platoon commander in a tank unit.

June 22 arrived. On that day Mark had to return to the location of his unit, to Pskov area. At 8 in the morning he left our house and went to the Warsaw railroad terminal, convinced that in 5 days he'll be home again and we will all live happily. Before his departure he visited his sister Olia in Pushkino and brought me a baby-stroller from her. Olia's daughter Allochka was 5 years old and did not need her stroller any more. Olia, by the way, got this stroller as a gift from Arkadii for her baby's birth, and we inherited it from her.

Mark's train was approaching Louga when women boarding the train on small stations, one by one, started asking him: «Comrade Commander, is that true that we are at war?» First he answered negatively, then started saying: «Don't panic!» In Louga he walked out on the platform and heard Molotov's speech broadcast about Hitler's treacherous attack on the Soviet Union. Freight trains with bread, sent to Hitler by the Soviet government, have not yet reached Germany. Mark stood in the middle of the platform confused: what should he do? – Go back home or catch up with his detachment? Two trains were waiting for departure: the one that brought him from Leningrad – and the one that was going back to Leningrad. Finally, his sense of duty took over. The Soviet regime rammed it into people's heads that public interest was above any private issue. Hence, Mark went back to his Pskov train and reached the station where his platoon stood before. It was not there. There was an order to relocate to the forest and to start preparations for the defense of Leningrad from the Karelian Isthmus direction. Mark learned this from one master-sergeant who was loading their supplies. This man also told him where the platoon had gone. Mark caught up with them on the march.

In the meantime, I was busy with my child and knew nothing. I was sitting on the sofa breastfeeding the baby. Telephone was on the wall in my room. Suddenly it started ringing: one call, then another, then the third one... Valia was answering. Each time I heard her say: «Don't pull my leg! What nonsense! Don't be silly!» She literally could not step away from the phone – so often it was ringing. All our relatives called: they all knew that I returned from the hospital only 4 days before. «What is it all about?» I asked Valia. She said something to the effect that all these people were trying to play a trick on us by

talking about the war.

I immediately realized that the worst had happened – and burst into tears. Mama came in. «Why did I give birth to this baby at such a time!» I wept. Mama tried to sooth me. She said that with God's help Mark will come back home. I rushed to our house management office. Our residential complex consisted of 6 buildings, 500 apartments in each, 2 or 3 nuclear family in each apartment. All in all, over 3 000 people lived there. At the office I received a pass to gas and bomb shelters for me and the baby. Everything was ready for the war: gas and bomb shelter were built under every building. Families with infants had the right to go first, then – the elderly, then – the rest...

Wartime life started. At the beginning there were no air attacks. They came in September. The summer of 1941 was warm and sunny, and no one could imagine what was coming. We had our regular stock of sweets and delicacies, such as walnuts, preserves and raisins. Mama used all this when she made cakes. My sister suggested: «Why don't we eat all this? What if they drop a bomb on our house and everything perishes?» –«Go ahead, you are welcome», Mama said. Valia was a merry girl and turned everything into laughter and jokes.

So, from time to time we would climb up on my wide sofa and enjoy delicacies. Had we known about the impending hunger, we'd have stretched it over a longer period of time.

Time passed, and we were getting used to wartime regulations. Nevertheless, my baby was always ready for an emergency. She slept wrapped in a blanket and tied with a ribbon. I also slept fully dressed. Air-raids could be expected any time of day or night.

From the very first days of war food coupon system was introduced. Bread and all other foods in Leningrad could be sold only to coupon holders, and from day to day food rations diminished until they reached 125 g of bread per person. First I continued working at Red Dawn factory. I returned to work when my maternity leave ended. Our old pre-war housemaid Tania was still with us. She used to bring my daughter to the factory where I met them at the control post. I would take the baby to an empty room then and breastfeed her. I had little milk and little time: just my dinner-break. I was nervous and the baby was always hungry. Soon evacuation order came through: all women employees with children had to receive their pay and follow the factory to Ufa. I still had no idea how serious the situation was. I did not want to leave Leningrad and did not want to go without my parents and sister. I was told that, regardless of my wishes, I could not work at the factory any more. They allowed me to take

my family and as much luggage as we wanted, including even beds. For the transportation of equipment the factory was to be given a freight train. We had to give up our food coupons and got food for the road instead. We were told to start packing.

Our departure was scheduled for the 17<sup>th</sup> of August. But it was not to be. On the 17<sup>th</sup> it turned out that the freight train had not arrived. First they said to expect the train in two days, then in three days... The train never arrived. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September Leningrad was hemmed in on all sides. The blockade started. We were left in the company of enormous packs of luggage which none of us could as much as move later.

The story of blockage and survival in wartime Leningrad could fill a separate book. I have no such ambitions. Still, I cannot avoid this theme altogether.

As soon as the encirclement was completed, fire-attacks and bombardments started. One of the first bombs hit the so-called Badaiev Food Reserve warehouses where a large stock of food reserves was kept. Warehouse buildings were made of wood and they were obliterated by fire. Everything that could burn – such as flour – burned down. Butter, sugar and candies melted into the earth. These warehouses were not equipped for wartime food preservation. In the Soviet Union changes take a lot of time. There was, however, no time at all. City skies were pink and red from burning warehouses.

We lived on the Vyborg Side and had no idea what was burning – but we saw the red sky. Those who lived closer saw sugar and other foods melt. Starting from that day daily food rations sharply diminished. This was the beginning of terrible starvation.

People started dying from hunger two months later, in November. They were ready to go anywhere to get scrambles of bread and other food. I also took a trolley that ran down Lesnoi Prospect to some circle line village. There were rumors that people will be taken out of there by ferry. I think they were Soviet Germans. We heard that they were planning to sell potatoes from their orchards. But they refused to sell it and we returned empty handed. On the way back a siren screamed, the trolley stopped by the park and we went out. My companions hid in the bushes, covering their heads with bags and newspapers. I looked up and saw an air fight for the first time in my life. On that day Nazi fighters broke Soviet defense and reached Leningrad.

My husband was in the front. He caught up with his tank platoon and, along with armored fighter-troops detachment was sent to the

Baltic area at the disposal of General Berzarin. In Latvia their detachment suffered a crushing defeat. Mark and four other soldiers had to escape from the encirclement to the East. It took them 20 days of walking through the woods. Twice Mark fell into the hands of Germans at military prisoner camps, and both times he managed to escape. He risked being killed either for being a Jew – or for his attempt to escape.

As I said earlier, that spring Valia graduated from high school and decided to continue her studies at The Institute for foreign Languages. She wanted to enter the English faculty, albeit at school her foreign language training was in German. She passed the exams and was accepted. Naturally, because of the war, there were not so many candidates. Soon The Institute was evacuated, and Valia stayed at home. She was digging trenches around Leningrad. When hunger stroke, she suffered the most. She was always hungry and often fainted from hunger.

Every day we received 625 g of bread for the entire family. First Mama would cut our loaf in half, and then each half was divided into 4 parts. The first half was eaten in the morning, the second – in the evening. We ate only twice a day. We tried to sleep longer in the morning and went to bed early at night. Papa collected breadcrumbs with his fingers and licked them off. He also was in bad shape. He was so weak that he could not walk and stayed in bed all the time.

Our building had central steam heat system, but it did not work, because boiler-rooms had no fuel. Pipes froze and burst. The winter of 1941-1942 was very cold and the temperature in our apartment was below freezing. Valia, I and my child slept in the kitchen. It was a little warmer because we managed to heat it up by closing the door to the hallway. Mama and Papa slept in their bedroom. They slept with heads under the blankets and by morning there was a crust of ice from their breathing on the blankets. Firewood was nowhere to be found. Instead, we sawed up furniture right there, in the apartment, and used the pieces to warm up the kitchen. Sometimes Mama managed to exchange firewood for a slice of bread. I was stronger than others, and it was my task to walk down to the yard, saw up a log we'd managed to acquire, chop it up with an ax and bring a pile of wood up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Sometimes house management office asked us to take apart nearby wooden structures and take the boards for heating. These were either the houses burnt by conflagrations or those that impeded military maneuvers.

Water and sewage pipes also froze, so there was no water in the

apartment. For water Valia and I used to go to one of the ice-holes. Usually there were lines by the ice-holes. Ice was building up around ice holes. One had to climb up on ice on all fours, put down a pile and fetch some water. Valia was usually holding my legs from below to keep me from slipping. Also, we lived in an urban apartment and had no piles. It was impossible to buy them. Somehow we managed to get a sled. We put milk jars and cooking pots on it – and rode down to the ice-hole. On the way half of the water spilled. My hands were all black, frost-bitten and covered with bloody cracks from sawing, chopping and handling water in freezing temperatures. I thought they'd never look normal again.

Before the war my hands were the subject of everyone's admiration. They were white, and round, with beautifully shaped long fingers and nails. I took good care of my hands. From the age of 17 I regularly did manicure. I used to tell everyone that hands were my working tool and therefore they should look nice. I had musical fingers that stretched two tones wider than an octave. During the war these hands had to perform a lot of tasks they had not been familiar with, such as planting, weeding, harvesting, sawing wood, harnessing horses, loading coal and unloading potatoes... But I will tell about it in its turn; let us not rush ahead.

So far I wrote nothing about my daughter – how I named and registered her. In my girlhood in Odessa I knew one charming young actress named Inna. She was so sweet that I vowed that if I ever have a daughter her name will be Inna.

Because of war and all the troubles it took me a long time to collect myself and make a trip to ZAGS (civil acts registry office). When I was finally ready to go, Mama asked me how I was planning to name my girl. «Inna», I said. Mama responded that it would be good to name her after my aunt Polia, or Perl in Yiddish, my father's sister. «And you can still call her Inna. What's the difference – Polina – inna. The ending is the same.» I was not in the mood for arguing, especially at the time when it was not clear whether we were going to survive or not.

It took me a long time and a lot of effort to reach the ZAGS office. It was on Karl Marx Street. During the time that it took me to get there from Lesnoi, the warning siren screamed 7 or 8 times and each time all passers-by were herded into bomb-shelters. Finally, I reached my destination, registered the baby and received her birth certificate issued to Polina Markovna Bekker. All family members and friends call her Innochka. She was born in the worst of times. I

had nothing to eat myself while I was breastfeeding her. To quiet the pangs of hunger, I took to drinking boiled water with salt instead of sugar. She screamed all the time because she was hungry. When she was 3 months old, a physician at children's clinic prescribed her a daily ration of 200 g of milk and 100 g of semolina or other porridge. Every day I went to get this food from children's dairy kitchen located on Lesnoi Prospect by Litovsky Bridge. Hundreds of women formed lines in front of this kitchen. Litovsky Bridge was regularly bombarded, but not a single mother dared to leave the line, because it meant no food for the infant. Some days we saw a sign on the kitchen door: «Closed. Power and water are shut off.» This was the absolute worst, because infants were weak and could die.

These 200 g of Innochka's milk we had to divide between her and Papa, because he was very weak and literally on the brink of starvation. In the meantime, my mother was furiously searching for food. She was ready to give up all her possessions: furniture, jewelry, clothes etc. She took it piece by piece to the marketplace and traded for a slice of bread or a cheese sandwich or for other food item. Every now and then she brought home potential buyers. She would show them in, throw every door of every closet open and give up everything they chose. Her fashionable wardrobe with a mirror was exchanged for a loaf of bread; her *treillage* – for 300 g of bread. The buyer was one employee of military registration and enlistment office. She also traded our possessions for logs and plank boards to burn in the kitchen stove. Frankly, I do not understand how in the world I could manage all the washing and drying when water, firewood and soap were so sparse. – But I did manage, and my daughter was always dry and clean. Her swaddling clothes never had that smell of dried pee other children's wraps had. I think, it was my youth and energy that allowed me to accomplish such amazing deeds.

Unlike us, many families did nothing to survive. They just stayed in bed, slowly dying one by one. Some refused to part with their possessions, others had no strength to look for food.

Writing about The Leningrad Blockade is difficult. Many books are written about this terrible time. I intend to describe what I saw with my own eyes, and nothing else. I still remember it after 40 and something years, and I probably will never forget. I cannot forget gray emaciated people sway as if they were drunk. Except they were swaying of hunger. Women stopped using make-up, of course. They covered their heads with dirty kerchiefs, black from smoke, instead of hats. They had no water – and frequently no energy – to wash

those kerchiefs. The winter of 1941 was very harsh. People went to the bakery for their food rations as early as possible, while it was still dark. Most of them traveled in pairs, because, once they got their share, they were in danger of being robbed. Once Mama went alone. She got her ration, slipped it into her bosom and walked all the way home screaming her heart out that she'd been robbed. The bakery was in our residential complex, in the other building. The way to the bakery was strewn with bodies. Some were on the stairs, some on porches, and some on plain ground. Those who were still alive could not spare their sleds: they needed them to bring water from ice-holes. They brought bodies from the entire territory of our complex to our yard. They were piled up, like logs, in the spacious boiler-room. As the boiler-room filled, trucks arrived and took the bodies out into the cemetery where they buried them in a common grave. Very few people were strong enough to take their dead to the cemetery on sleds, then pay grave-diggers to tear apart frozen earth and then bury their deceased in frozen graves. Instead, people chose to bring the dead into our courtyard: at least, they figured, their beloved would be laid to rest.

First the sight of corpses gave me shudders; then I got used to it. In the streets I often saw people stumble and sway. If they fell, they were finished: they had no energy to get up on their own, and passers-by had no energy to help them. Those who fell usually lapsed into slumber and froze to death. Men were taking it worse than women. Corpulent women lived longer than thin ones. Physicians said, they fed on their own fat. That was my case. During the blockade I lost 24 kg and became slim and youthful looking. I was 28, and Valia was 18, but those who did not know us kept asking who was older.

As the war started, telephones in private apartments were shut off. Electricity and heating were the next to go, followed by water and sewage pipes. Public transportation was no more. Trolley-cars stood in their tracks buried in snow, while people wandered around like shadows.

Once a letter arrived from uncle Yasha, Papa's brother. He wrote that he had sent us some food with a man who had to return to Leningrad from the front — and that we had to pick it up in Sennaia Square area.

Valia and I started off early in the morning. It took us a lot of effort to get from the Vyborg Side to Sennaia. I do not remember what they told us: maybe that the parcel had not been delivered — or they had eaten it. Disheartened, we started back on foot when a military

truck appeared and we waved it to stop. Guys in the truck agreed to give us a lift. They were young and kept joking, laughing and asking who of us was older. I always looked younger than my age, and my sister – the opposite. In our courtyard we saw Mama from the distance : she'd managed to buy a log and was dragging it home. She mimicked, asking us whether we had succeeded. We both spontaneously turned around to show her our empty backpacks – the ones that had been prepared to carry food.

Still, there were people in Leningrad who never starved, most of them worked for the Soviet trading system. They ate well, helped their relatives and even exchanged food for other people's valuables, like jewelry and furniture.

Many of them never bothered to conceal their privileged position in front of the hungry.

In our strife for survival we never rejected the lowest means. At times Mama brought home potato peel and made pancakes out of it. At other times, a horse would fall in the street nearby, and its driver would immediately dress the carcass and sell the meat. We used to buy it happily and then we made cutlets.

In the marketplace Mama stroke an acquaintance with a young man who later helped us to get food. I do not remember what he did and where he worked. He did visit us at home, and Mama always gave him everything he wanted. When The Road of Life opened, it was he who helped us to escape from Leningrad. He was not involved in trade; neither was he a KGB man. All this, however, happened later, while at the time of my narrative we were in a bad shape and had no hope. I was writing letters to my husband, to uncle Yasha and to other relatives. Uncle Yasha was an important person, a battalion supplies manager. In the first months of the war Vneshtorg stores were still operating in the frontlines. There one could find anything for cash. Several times Uncle Yasha sent trucks to pick us up and help us escape from Leningrad. He could not do it too often, because every army officer had kin in Leningrad and wanted to get them out. But each time I refused to go. I did not want to leave without my parents and my sister. Unfortunately, that did not seem possible.

Once Uncle Yasha sent a covered truck heated up by a woodstove. He wanted to take me and Innochka out at once, and to get other family members later. I refused. Back then it was known for families to separate and then lose each other forever. Then uncle Yasha sent us an enormous parcel with food. Thanks to this gift, we survived and managed to restore Papa's health to a degree. Before he



had not been able to get up. His improvement gave us a chance to escape from Leningrad. Uncle Yasha's gift box contained cereals, dried bread, soap, tea and other food products.

The winter of 1941-42 was particularly difficult, and we started thinking about evacuation seriously.

At the end of August of 1941 Mark came to Leningrad in a truck with a group of soldiers. He brought a parcel for Voroshilov and delivered it to Smol'ny. Mark offered to take me out of the city under the condition that we carry nothing but the essentials in our backpacks. We were not ready for the evacuation yet. I asked Mark whether he thought that the Germans would occupy the city. He said they would not, but life in the city would be very, very hard. Then I said that I could not go naked and barefoot, and that, should the Germans arrive, I'd always be able to follow Soviet troops with a backpack and a baby in my arms.

It was then that the encirclement of Leningrad was completed. Mark appealed for help to General-Lieutenant Mordvinov, head of home front, for whom he had brought a parcel from his immediate commander, GHO representative General-Major Yermoshkevich. Mordvinov allowed Mark to board a military boat to go back across Ladozhskoye Lake, leaving his truck and soldiers behind. He also promised to help Mark's family if there was need. Mark crossed the lake and hitch-hiked back to his army unit.

When life in the surrounded city became particularly unbearable, I appealed to Smol'ny for help, remembering General Mordvinov's promise. They said that all they could do was lift me and my daughter out by air, while my parents and sister would have to stay. I refused to go and started exploring different options. I visited military registration and enlistment office and military evacuation base. Everywhere they offered me the same: they'll take me and the baby out, and the rest will stay behind. I could not accept it.

Ice-road across Ladozhskoye Lake was already functioning. People were taken across in buses. The road was under fire, and every now and then a bus with passengers would go under. Still, many people were ready to risk their lives in order to escape from the city of death.

It was then that my mother's acquaintance Vladimir Nikolaevich came into picture. He managed to put us on the bus with all our belongings. Our luggage was in huge bags, packed back in the summer when we were preparing to leave with the factory. We were too weak to carry those bags. We simply rolled them down the stairs

and squeezed them on the bus.

Our apartment was left to the supervision of our ex-housemaid Tania's two sisters. Her mother Dusia was a live-in housemaid in building # 61 on Lesnoi. The family she worked for had left, and Dusia stayed in their first floor apartment. Before leaving we took our most valuable items to her place. We were convinced that first floor was less dangerous than the fourth.

Mama asked Mark to do two things for her. First, she asked him to re-register our entire apartment in his name. Once registered in the name of a fighting officer, it was less likely to be taken away for someone else's use. Before the war, one room was registered in Mark's name, and the other two – in Papa's name. Mama also asked Mark to help register Tania's sisters as residents of our apartment, for we wanted them to supervise our place and they wanted to stay in Leningrad. Mark managed to accomplish both tasks. Thus, our apartment was preserved for us.

On February the 26<sup>th</sup>, 1942, we started across Ladozhskoye Lake along The Road of Life. Bread rations had increased up to 200 g by then. The crossing was scary and difficult. Apart from danger, it was freezing cold, and my arms went numb from hours of holding my 7.5-months-old daughter. We crossed during the night. Finally, we reached the shore and drove up to the station where a freight train was waiting for us. With great difficulty we shoved our packs onto the platform and climbed in ourselves, completely exhausted. I wrote «climbed» because there were no footboards and train car platforms were very high. There was a small woodstove inside, and people were lying on berths around it. They were all emaciated and looked terrible. At some of the stops hot dinners were brought to us. We were told not to eat too much, because hunger victims can die of overeating.

Many people were so weak, that they could not stand the road and died right there, on the train. At stops their bodies were taken off the train.

Two days after our escape from Leningrad a box with food from Mark was delivered to our address. Aware of the situation in the city, many frontline officers purchased food in military food stores, combined purchased goods with their own reserves, and loaded all this onto trucks to take across the lake to the city. General Yermoshkevich had a sister in Leningrad. Her name was Nina Sergeevna, she worked for the passport office. General asked Mark to put together a box for her, too. Our box had so much food in it that we could have survived

until the end of the war on it. Unfortunately, we were not there when it arrived. The driver took the truck into our courtyard and started looking for the needed apartment. He ran across Senya's wife Liuba who told him that we had left, and that she was also one of the Bekkers. Thus she got hold of the box – and this helped her to survive.

In the meantime, we were on the train moving during the night in the direction of Tikhoretskaia Station.

Many people were getting off at different stations to rejoin their relatives. Finally, we were alone in the car. In my luggage I had a big map of the Soviet Union. I looked at the map and realized that we were going directly into the hands of Germans. Tikhoretskaia changed hands several times, passing from the Soviets to the Germans and back. Having just escaped starvation in Leningrad, we were heading for death at the hands of the Germans.

This was the second time that my intuition helped to find the correct way of action and thus saved my family from death. The train was coming to a stop – possibly, the last stop before Tikhoretskaia. It stopped for no longer than a minute. We threw out our luggage and jumped off when the train was already moving. The train went on without us. Those were horrible days. We endured a lot – but we survived.

Another train was leaving from that station to Michurinsk. We boarded it. At dusk we arrived to Michurinsk and set to dragging our stuff to the station building. A young man came up and offered his help. Before we realized what was happening, he took one of the bags and was gone. I tried to follow him, but immediately lost him because of the black-out. He never returned. He was a plain thief.

Right away we decided to head for Ufa. Mark's mother, his sister and her husband Seriozha evacuated there long before with Karl Marx plant. In Michurinsk we checked in most of our impossible luggage to be shipped to Ufa. Our own journey there was long and hard. We had to change trains many times, because tickets were very hard to find even with the military officer's wife's ID card that I had. Back then those ID cards were very valuable. And still, we had to ride in freight-cars, on open platforms, and only rarely – in passenger cars. We slept in railroad station buildings. The baby made it all the more difficult. I had very little milk and she was always hungry and screaming.

In Saratov my baby-girl went down with toxic dyspepsia. In most cases infants die from this disease. At first she was just crying. I stood in the terminal building, holding her in my arms while she

screamed and screamed. Suddenly an officer came up and asked what was the matter with her. I said that she was hungry and that I had no food for her. My looks and hopeless expression in my eyes told him everything. He took off his backpack, shook its contents out of the window, and found a few pieces of dried wheat bread on the bottom. He gave them to me and suggested that I get some hot water, soak the bread and feed the baby. I put my girl on the window-sill, leaving her with the officer, and went off in search of hot water. I found none. When I returned, Innochka was still crying.

Then he told me: «Put the bread in your mouth, and then give it to her» – «I cannot», I said. «She'll die!» – «I still cannot.»

Innochka fell silent and stopped reacting to anything. I realized that my baby was dying. I rushed to the medical emergency office, but they pushed me out of there, saying that all their patients had typhoid fever. They sent me to the nearby clinic for railroad workers. There Innochka was diagnosed with toxic dyspepsia. A physician gave me a prescription and said that my baby needed a heating pad. I explained that we were going to Ufa. «Whether you go or not – it is all the same for her», he answered, meaning that my baby was going to die anyway. Innochka could neither smile, nor cry. They refused to admit me to the children's room at the terminal because it was full and because my baby was sick.

In a diner for escapees we met my parents' friends Revekka Yefimovna and her husband. Her brother, a physician, moved to Saratov before the war. She gave me his address.

We decided to go there, hoping that they'd take me and the baby in. There was no one at home except their housemaid and Revekka Yefimovna. The housemaid shook with fear when she saw us. She said that her mistress would never allow us to stay, for she was afraid of the epidemic of typhoid. While we were waiting, I ran to the pharmacy and bought medication. The housemaid put my baby on a heating pad, and Innochka got better immediately.

The mistress of the house immediately threw us out. The housemaid could not help crying. She volunteered to ask around: maybe one of the neighbors could take us in. But all her attempts failed and we had to go back to the terminal. Later my mother always recalled this kind woman with veneration – and her mistress with contempt.

It was already dark and the terminal was closed. There was one narrow passage, and the military were waiting in a line to go inside. When my turn came, a guard pushed me away saying that there was no room for civilians. I was so desperate that I tried shoving the baby

into his arms screaming: «Then take her – I have nowhere else to go!»

Suddenly an officer who was standing behind me rushed in and grabbed the guard's coat: «You, home front rat, how do you dare to offend a woman with a child!» He thrust the guard aside and took us inside the building.

Innochka had horrible diarrhoea. We had no swaddling clothes and there was nowhere to wash them. Therefore, we started pulling sheets, pillow-cases and other items from our luggage, and when she soiled them – we threw them away. We stroke an acquaintance with a woman who cleaned the terminal and she suggested a place where we could spend the night. We went there. They gave us one room with one bed in it. Enormous lice were crawling all over that bed. We all had to sleep in it. I do not know how it happened that we did not contract typhoid fever. In the middle of the night the adjacent room caught on fire. Its resident, a woman, came home from work, lit her stove and her blanket touched the stove and started burning. We had to run out into the street again. It was freezing cold and we had a child in our arms.

Finally, we managed to punch out tickets and were allowed to board a regular passenger train. Once again we took the pains of squeezing our luggage into spare spaces under berths in different compartments. Other passengers, who were mostly the military, got interested in us. When they learned that we were from Leningrad, it only inspired their curiosity, for there was no information about the situation in Leningrad in the press. One of them asked Papa whether it was true that Leningradians had to feed on cats, dogs and sometimes even people's corpses. What was his exact answer I do not know, but right before the train's departure he was arrested. Militiamen came and took him off the train. They allowed the rest of us to go, but we took our garb off the train once again and remained in Saratov. Our luggage was searched, and nothing suspicious was found. Militiamen noticed our FED camera and wanted to take it away, but I knew that this was against the law and refused to give it up.

We stayed a bit longer in that cursed city of Saratov. Memories of it still give me shivers. Then we realized that there was nothing we could do for Papa – and left. He was convicted and sent to prison where he had to endure more hunger and sufferings. Eventually, he got out and found us in the village of Raievka in Bashkiriya. I wrote Mark a letter, describing this incident.

In March 1942 Mark already had Order of the Red Star and was raised to the rank of captain ahead of schedule. First he was recom-

mended for Order of The Red Banner in August 1941 for rescuing General Yarmoshkevich's life and for accomplishing a successful intelligence sally. During this action 10 Germans were annihilated and enemy's papers were delivered to the 27<sup>th</sup> North Western Army Headquarters. Shortly afterwards Mark's battalion was annihilated and for a while he was not accounted for, falling into the category of the «vanished without trace» persons. Therefore, his decoration was delayed. In December 1941 army headquarters sent an inquiry, learned the reason for this delay and processed a new decoration for Mark – Order of The Red Star.

Mark read my letter about Papa's arrest to his commander General-Major Yarmoshkevich who, in his turn, discussed this matter with a member of Military council. The member of Military Council called other members of Military Council and asked them to arrange Papa's release. They did, and in a few months Papa was free.

With Ufa on our mind, we went on a difficult journey with too many connections and too little food. The worst was lack of food for Innohka who suffered from toxic dyspepsia.

Once I was walking down a railroad platform and saw a group of military officers talking. One of them had a loaf of white bread under his arm. I stopped and could not take my crazed eyes off that bread. The officer asked what was wrong with me. I begged him to sell or give me a slice of bread for my dying child. He cut off a slice and gave it to me, free of charge, of course. The other time I saw someone with bagels – and also started begging. Those people obliged me as well.

Bitter disappointment awaited us in Ufa. We learned that Mark's mother, Olia and her daughter Allochka had been moved to Sverdlovsk by Olia's first husband Misha Bogorad who worked for the army office of NKVD (People's Committee for Internal Affairs). We found Mark's younger sister Raia and her husband Sergei. They worked for Karl Marx factory in Leningrad and were evacuated with the factory in 1941. They lived not far from the factory in barracks and had one small room. We spent one night there and decided to go wherever resettlement office in Ufa will send us. They directed us 130 km away from Ufa, to the village of Raievka. We disembarked from the train, Valia stayed at the station with Innohka, while Mama and I went in search of a place to sleep. It was end of April, and streets were so muddy that we were in danger of walking out of our own shoes. It took us a few days to find a place to live: no one was interested in renting out. We had to sleep in the railroad station build-

ing. Finally, one kind lady took pity on us and rented us a small room. She herself had to move to the kitchen with 2 kids. Exactly 2 months after our departure from Leningrad we once again had a roof over our heads.

We took my baby out of her covers. She was 10.5 months old, but she could not even sit up, because since her very birth she'd been swaddled and tied up – first for fear of night air-raids, then because we were on the move. Her body was all wrinkled as that of an old lady; she was skinny and inert. Mama, Valia and I slept on the floor, our heads touching one wall, our feet – the other. This is how small our room was. Innochka had to be swaddled for the night, because she slept on a small table – the only piece of furniture in the room. Our neighbor had a goat and agreed to sell us half a liter of fresh goat-milk for Innochka every day. Goat milk and fresh air made her rapidly improve. Soon she was crawling, then sitting up, then – walking (with a considerable delay, of course). One sunny summer day I was walking back from the well with two piles of water when our hostess's son ran up to me.

– Auntie, look, your uncle is here!

First I could not understand what he meant. Suddenly I saw Mark walking towards me. Everything went dark before my eyes; I almost fainted. I stopped putting my piles on the ground. Mark noticed me – and also halted. Then he flung up his hands and screamed: «Look at my wife! Hitler ate up half of her!»

This last phrase he later reiterated in letters to all his brothers to the front. He told me that he'd been commissioned to GH Academy in Ufa. For a long time he received no letters from me, and when finally they learned our whereabouts, his commanders offered him to take a commission to Ufa in order to see us and help us settle down. But first he had business in Ufa. He offered to take me along. I was so happy to see him that I agreed, forgetting that I had a nursing baby. And, though I had very little milk, interrupting breastfeeding in the summer was no good. At least, that's what people say.

When we returned to Raievka, I offered Innochka my breast, but she pushed it away with both hands and refused to suck. I hadn't seen her for a few days, and she seemed different and somehow more mature to me. In Ufa we visited Raia and Seriozha. Mark finished his business and we came back.

Mark went to the local military registry office and asked them to provide assistance to his family. Combat fighters commanded great respect back then – and there were no signs of anti-Semitism. For

example, after visiting Raia we started walking to the bus stop and saw the bus taking off. We missed it. Bus-driver, however, stopped the bus, opened the doors and said: «You are welcome to come in, comrade combat officer!» Mark had his decoration on, and that was a rarity back then.

We wandered from house to house looking for a new apartment. Finally, we saw a big well-built house. Its owners were sitting at the table, enjoying samovar-boiled tea. We inquired about a room for rent. They answered that they had a room with a small extra bedroom, and that they could rent it out to us. They also said that other people had inquired about this room before, but the owners had refused to take them because they were Jews. When the Germans come, Hitler will surely hang both Jews and those who house them.

Mark replied to the effect that all people are equal and nationality does not matter. The thing was, our hosts had no idea how Jews looked. They were former kulaks – rich peasants, old residents of Bashkiria. The only Jews they'd seen were newcomers from small settlements in Ukraine and Belarus. They spoke bad, heavily accented Russian and burred. Certainly, our fluent Russian and Mark and Innochka's blonde hair did not remind them of those Jews. Mark moved us into our new apartment, got some fuel and took off. For a long time our hosts refused to believe that we were Jews, no matter how hard I tried to convince them. I was not used to hiding my nationality. When I finally succeeded, they demanded that we should leave their house. By then it was winter, temperatures were well below freezing. I promised that as soon as spring comes we'll find a new place. Not willing to wait, they removed our window-frames. It happened in March while blizzards were still howling outside. Freezing air flooded our room. I was alone at home with the child. I did my best to persuade our host to stop, but he wouldn't listen. When Mama came, I left Innochka with her and went to see Fomichev, head of the local NKVD office. I told him about the abuse we suffered at the hands of our host. He gave a note for our host. It was an order for him to see Fomichev as soon as possible. After his visit to NKVD, our host restored our window-frames and stopped pestering us. When it warmed up, we rented a different room from one lady and moved there. At that last address we remained until the end of the war.

Our village also hosted a group of young women with children, spouses of pilots serving in a flying regiment. We, officers' wives, organized a big amateur art group. Some were singing, others dancing, yet others liked to recite from the stage or play music. I liked to



sing and recite. We became so well-known that we started giving performances at military hospitals and military bases. We traveled to places of performance in trucks. Besides, in Raievka there was a hospital for war refugees. There we not only performed, but also assisted in patient care.

Since there was no professional employment in that village for me, I decided to go and work for the hospital. Hospital director allowed me to come in and study the skills of a surgical nurse. Initially the sight of blood scared me senseless. I remember my first visit to the OR where I saw a wounded man with half of his buttock torn off. I almost fainted. But I pulled myself together and stood through. Three months later I was already one of the best surgical nurses of the hospital. I assisted during surgeries, dressed wounds and performed many other tasks.

My knowledge of German and Latin was of great help to me in that line of work, because I could read medication names in Latin. My old work record book contains, among other things, written encouragement for my work at the hospital. *Victory over Germany (1941-1945)* medal, a decoration established by a post-war decree, was conferred on me for my work at the hospital. I received three more medals as War Participant. More literate and better educated than many other hospital workers, I was appointed a secretary for the military medical commission. Its responsibility was to discharge recovering soldiers back to the army – or home. I had to prepare materials for the commissioners; to keep track of medical histories, to register incoming patients and to provide papers and accompany to the station those who were discharged. I knew every responsible official in Raievka. Everyone respected me, because I approached every task with thoroughness and enthusiasm. These traits were part of my nature.

In the fall of 1942 my sister Valia went to Ufa and was admitted to the English faculty of Pedagogical Institute. She wanted to continue her education. She got a place in a dormitory which was, of course, cold and hungry, as all wartime dormitories. Students slept on plain boards and there was no running water. Hair had to be washed in a soup plate with melted snow. Still, they were all young and used to turn everything into a joke.

I tried to go on business trips to Ufa as frequently as possible in order to bring my sister food and make her life a little easier. Often I had to ride in a train lobby in freezing or inclement weather, with a backpack. I had to travel to Valia's dormitory late at night, during

black-outs, across empty, dangerous streets. But knowledge that it was all for my sister's benefit gave me pleasure.

As wife of a combat fighter, I was allotted an area of 0.15 ha for my private use. I ploughed it myself, planted potatoes, weeded it and harvested. They also gave me horses. I learned how to handle them and brought all harvest home.

I learned a lot of new skills. I performed jobs I had never heard of before. Pre-war life, when it was brought up in conversations, seemed like an impossible dream. We were born and lived our lives in the Soviet Union, not in the West – therefore we were content with the little we had and were happy to have it. I remember, how they gave me a truck to bring coal for the winter from a coal mine. I had to load coal into the truck myself. This, however, did not scare me: I was so happy that my family was going to have fuel for the winter. Every now and then officers' wives were sent to unload frozen potatoes from train cars. For this, we were allowed to take part of the load home. No job was difficult for us. We used to saw logs – also for the permission to take something home.

We realized that war was a national disaster. And still, I was always neatly dressed. I kept my nails manicured, even though I did not use nail polish. My main pride were my feet: unlike other women, I always kept them clean. Even hospital director noticed it, as he indicated in our conversation. He made a pass on me, but his solicitations were doomed. Once he suggested that my prudence was for the sake of my daughter. And my daughter then was only 3 years old.

There were no letters from Mark. A month passed, then two months, then three...I was very worried, not knowing where he was and imagining the worst. One friend of mine saw me crying and advised me to visit one local lady who had a reputation of a masterful fortune-teller. During the war people believed in everything: from God, to Satan, to fortune-telling. I went to that woman and she pronounced something like this: «You are very worried about your husband. He is alive and you will definitely meet him, but not in your house, but in a public office, on neutral territory». I was delighted and trusted her every word.

As it turned out later, Mark's special communications regiment had been dispatched to Iran to provide services for Soviet troops there. They were transferred to the disposal of Trans-Caucasian Front as per negotiations with the Allies. This information reassured me. Once Mark somehow managed to send me a parcel with rice and halva from Iran. These things were delicacies for us.

At times we had pleasant surprises, such as unexpected arrival of Arkadii, the only one of the Bekker brothers who was not in the army. He was assigned to home front in Sverdlovsk. Then Aunt Rachel, Mama's younger sister, arrived from Novosibirsk where she had been evacuated. She stayed with us, in our small room. Mark came thrice for 2-3 days each time. When army business arose in Ufa, he was always the one to go because everyone knew that he had a family there. When he wrote about his impending third arrival, I advised him to go and visit his mother in Sverdlovsk instead. «She'll be happy to see you», I wrote. «She'll be happy to learn that I visited you», he responded. And he came to Raievka.

As I said earlier, I did not want to have a child right after we married. First, we had not known each other all that long; second, I had subconscious fear that he may get to love the child more than me. When Innochka was born, however, Mark had only 4 days to be with her. He had no time to get used to her; to get a deeper feeling of fatherhood. He wrote me all the time, and his letters were tender and loving, but very often there was not a word in them about our daughter. He never asked questions about her, never sent his kisses to her. My maternal feelings were hurt and I finally conveyed that to Mark in a letter. He understood and never forgot about his daughter again.

As for my daughter, I used to tell her stories about her father who was at war, fighting Hitler. Afterwards she's dart with open arms whenever we saw a man in a military uniform, screaming: «This is my Daddy!»

She turned plump and beautiful. Her rosy cheeks, blonde hair and blue eyes won everyone's hearts. She was prone to horrible allergic reactions – then her cheeks would be covered with crust. At night she scratched it till it was festering and bleeding. I used to bring Lassal's ointment from the hospital, and it gave her great relief. Once her wounds became infected and she grew a festering swelling under her chin. My friend Zoia and I carried her to the hospital in our arms, changing turns. The hospital was pretty far. Our general surgeon operated Innochka and he ordered me to assist him in tending to the open wound. Everything worked fine. We made a thin horizontal incision which now looks as a crease or a wrinkle under her chin.

## END OF WAR

### TBILISI

By that time the encirclement of Leningrad had been already broken and we were thinking about returning home. Once again Mark had to contact Nina Sergeevna, General Yarmoshkevich's sister. She sent us invitations to Leningrad for the entire family. Then we decided that Innochka and I should join Mark for a while in Tbilisi, or rather in Dusheti, a small military town 60 km away from Tbilisi where Mark's military unit was based.

His military unit was called «Telegraph-operator Courses». Mark served as technical assistant there.

The war was close to its end. Soviet troops were taking back occupied cities, and, albeit life was still very difficult, everyone's mood started improving. The Allies opened the long-expected Second Front. Invitations to Leningrad were still on their way when Innochka and I boarded the train to Moscow. We left on June the 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944, on the day of her third birthday. Once invitations arrived, my parents and Valia were to leave for Leningrad. Once in Moscow, I took my daughter to Betia's house.

Innochka looked more like Betia than Betia's own daughter. Betia set her mind on feeding her up. The child's reaction made us cry and laugh at the same time. For example, she had never seen – and certainly never tasted – rice pilaf with raisins before. She was picking raisins out with her little fingers, asking us questions: «What is it? What do you call it?» She asked similar questions about many other foods. During the first three years of her life she never saw sugar, white bread, sausages, and cheeses and so on.

A few days later we boarded the Tbilisi train. Most of the passengers on the train were the military. They hadn't seen their families and children for a long time, and my child was the center of their attention. They kept carrying her around, taking her out for a walk when we stopped and offering her various delicacies. She, in her turn, trusted them all and called almost everyone «Papa». When we finally met Mark, she, for some reason, did not accept him as her father and refused to go into his arms. She may have been exhausted by the road.

Mark drove us to Dusheti where our life started to resemble paradise, especially by the standards of those years. Our house had 4 apartments: for the head of staff and his three deputies. Entrances into all apartments were separate. We had a 40 m<sup>2</sup> room, a 30 m<sup>2</sup> kitchen

and all essential furniture: beds, chairs and a table. The best of all, we were young and happy to be together again. Soldiers brought us firewood and food from officers' canteen. Later we acquired hens and piglets. The latter fed on garbage from the same canteen and was cared for by soldiers. Initially I occupied myself with social work, then was elected chairman of women's council.

Soon our military commander commissioned me to organize a daycare center for officers' children. As soon as I accomplished this task, he appointed me its director. I turned it into a model children's facility. Military personnel liked me, and they always obliged me if I needed something for my daycare center. I recruited permanent staff among officers' wives. Mark's position as deputy commander allowed me to have a platoon of soldiers at the service of daycare center. Sometimes Mark even complained to his boss that my daycare-related demands slow down his work, but Piotr Maksimovich always took my side of the argument. After the war we met him in Moscow, and in Mark's presence he confessed that I had been his «secret love», even though he had a young wife Kalia (Kaleria Sergeevna).

From time to time I made trips to Tbilisi to attend kindergarten directors' forums. There I shared my experience with others. My daycare center was one of the best. When in answer to their questions I told my colleagues about my husband's position in the army, the reasons for my success would become clear to them. I did not have to steal food for my private needs from daycare reserve, as it was commonly done throughout the country. We had plenty and were content with it.

Soon we befriended a few good families. Our closest friends were canteen manager Alexander Solomonovich Amirkhanov and his family. His wife Susanna was like mother to me. Our friendship lasted until our very departure to America. They and their children and grandchildren used to visit us in Leningrad – and we visited them in Tbilisi. It was pure, selfless friendship that stretched through forty-plus years. They shared our joys and sorrows, and always intuited our circumstances from the distance. If something bad happened to us, a call from Tbilisi would come right away, and Susanna's voice would ask: «Sofa-Jan, how are you? My soul is hurting for you for some reason!» Her intuition was faultless.

Soon after my departure to Georgia, my parents and Valia returned to Leningrad. Valia rested for a while, and then came to visit us. She was a young girl of 21, and she immediately became the cen-

ter of officers' attention. The next summer Mama came. All in all, we spent a year and three months in Dusheti. During this time I absorbed enough conversational Georgian to act as a translator when needed. That was all the more convenient, because I was often mistaken for a Georgian woman.

I had a nice voice and often sang in performances staged in Officers' Club. My personal qualities and my professional reputation commanded everyone's great respect.

In March 1945 our military commander put me in charge of preparations for a Women's Day party. The party was held on the premises of my daycare center. I was the hostess and my husband was sitting by my side as a guest. We had nice time and enjoyed ourselves.

In 1945 the end of the war was in the air from the very start of the year. One could feel it. Therefore, I shared with Mark my desire to have a second child. Two kids had always been my dream. Besides, post-war life was supposed to be still hard, and a little more hardship in the shape of a child wouldn't hurt. We stopped taking precautions, but then Mark had to check into a hospital.

On February 22<sup>nd</sup> he was discharged for two days to celebrate Soviet Army Day. He was happy to come home, for he hadn't seen me for a while. I was busy in the kitchen, cooking holiday meal in an apron, flushed from the heat. Suddenly he swept me into his arms and carried me to the sofa. For the first time in my life I felt like something entered me – and cried about it out loud. At that moment my son was conceived. For a while I did not dare to dream about a boy and did not tell anyone that I was pregnant. I felt and looked well and had no pigment spots on my face. When I was in my 5<sup>th</sup> months and the baby started kicking, I told the news to my parents. They thought I was nuts to keep a baby at such difficult times. Later on it became clear that I had made the right decision. Once back in Leningrad, I wouldn't have dared to undertake such a feat. Our life there was too complex. When I told Susanna of my pregnancy, she became even more caring and attentive. I washed our linens at home, using an ancient device – a metallic washing board, and I always rubbed off the skin on my hands. Susanna would come, shoo me off the tub and wash everything herself. I had never seen such kind, sympathetic people before.

Susanna was 15 when Alexander fell in love with her, kidnapped her and married her. Soon after that she had to have her breasts and uterus removed. They had no kids. Then they adopted a little girl called Ofelia, Alexander's brother's daughter. They raised her, her children and her grandchildren. They were the best of parents. Their

kids had both technical and musical education. Ofelia and her family had the best of care. Ofelia was married twice – and both times they gave her dowry, because such is the custom in the Caucasus. All in all, they had their fill of children-related worries, just like any regular parents.

I told Susanna that, if I had a son, I wanted to circumcise him. She asked around among the Jews she knew and found a man who could perform this ceremony. She promised me that my wish will be fulfilled. But when the war was over, our military unit was disbanded, we returned to Leningrad and our son was born there. I will write about it later on.

And now I want to recall one other interesting episode from our life in the Caucasus. It is about our dog Allan.

Once Mark went to the city with a group of officers, and there a wonderful dark-red Irish setter took a liking to him. He tried to shoo it away, but the dog wouldn't go. Then Mark put the dog in the truck and brought it to Dusheti. I was horrified: I had never had animals in the house and was quite indifferent to them.

Summer is here again, I am in the camp since June 12, and I will now go on working on my «saga». All through the winter I had no time for writing. We do not work, but our days are very busy. I'll try to write down as much as I can while I am in the camp.

And now – back to the dog Mark brought from Tbilisi. We named it Allan. It must have sensed my indifference, because it followed Mark everywhere around Dusheti. When Mark had to go inside the building, Allan would stay outside and wait for him. He was very attached to Mark. In Dusheti they made up a joke: «If you want to find major Bekker, look for his dog». One day a local Georgian asked if he could borrow Allan for coupling with his bitch. Mark agreed. Three days later, when Allan returned, we saw that something was wrong with his hind paws. They were paralyzed and the dog could not walk. Mark took the dog to the veterinarian and he said that the animal should be shot. Mark could not and would not do it. Every day before work he'd take Allan out into the garden and put him on a rug. I brought him food and fed him. At night Mark carried the dog back in and put it on a special bed in the kitchen. A few months later the dog started standing up. When it became stronger, it started following me – not Mark – everywhere. I took it as gratitude for care. It was very touching. Before leaving to Leningrad for good, we found a nice family of a cook in the other military unit, and gave Allan to them. But I will always remember him.



**Mark with his beloved friends Amirhanov family -  
Alexander with his wife Susanna and granddaughter Allochka.  
Tblisi, Georgia, Soviet Union.**



**Friendship is lasting between few generations, from 1944 till today.**



## **RETURN TO LENINGRAD BIRTH OF OUR SON JOSEPH**

We left Tbilisi in August when I was in my seventh month and Innohka had just turned four. From Dusheti we came to Tbilisi, to our friends Amirkhanov's house. They welcomed us in, gave us their own bedroom and made a feast to honor our departure. They invited many guests and cooked a traditional shish-kebab. I will never forget the taste of that shish-kebab. We spent a few days with them, and then started off in the direction of Leningrad. We stopped in Moscow, at Betia's house. Raia, Mark's younger sister, was also there. She was pregnant with her second son Yurochka, and Betia was pregnant with her second daughter Irochka. Betia already had a daughter and she wanted a son – but a girl was born instead. Raia had a son, and she wanted a girl – but gave birth to the second son. Only Mark and I got what we wanted.

In Leningrad we settled in our old apartment – the one where we lived with my parents before the war. There we had a 16 sq m room. Mark had to go back to Moscow to the reserve tank battalion. He was not demobilized yet. I stayed in Leningrad with Innohka and my parents.

Once again Mark was away during my pregnancy. He only visited me from time to time. On November the 17<sup>th</sup> I went into labor.

On that day the doorbell rang unexpectedly. I opened the door and saw Mark's brother Arosha, who was also in the army and arrived from the Karelian Isthmus.

He spent the day with us and then said that he was planning to go to his sweetheart's for the night. I asked him to stay with us Saturday and Sunday nights because I might go into labor one of those days. He, however, turned up Friday morning, at about 2 a.m. I was surprised to see him. He explained that he suddenly got an urge to go and be with us. His premonition turned correct. That night I went into labor. Arosha was dressed in two minutes and watched in amazement how, in between the contractions, I made my bed, got dressed, put make-up and lipstick on – and then declared that I was ready. He was impressed by my behavior and said that if all women behave like this – then childbirth is not that scary.

I was all pink and white, fresh-looking, and even a small belly did not spoil my appearance. I was planning to give birth at the Pediatric Institute not far from our house. Arosha went with me. When we walked into intake office, nurse on duty told us that mater-

nity ward was closed for the day for repairs and no one was supposed to be admitted. We begged her to reconsider because I lived nearby and had nowhere else to go in the middle of the night. She went to consult the doctor who was apparently slumbering behind a screen. The doctor asked who brought me and, learning that he was military officer, agreed to take me in.

At 8:55 a.m. I gave birth to my son. This time labor was much easier and ended faster. My old sutures, however, opened up and had to be stitched up again. I was still on the table when a nurse came in. She said that my husband was here and was asking about the baby. This was, of course, Arosha, and my husband was in Moscow, but I did not correct her, just asked to tell him that I had a son. Senya learned from my parents that Arosha had gone to the hospital – and also came running. At that time Sasha unexpectedly arrived – and he joined his brothers in the hospital. Thus, three Bekker brothers assembled there, and they looked so much alike that the staff could not understand who of them was my husband. Upon learning the news about a boy, they started shouting with joy and shove money into nurse's hands to thank her for the good news.

Then she approached me again and asked: «What is he like?» I understood their interest and said that the boy was blonde, meaning that he took after the Bekkers. They were very pleased.

They sent Mark a telegram with congratulations and he came the next day. He arrived to the hospital and asked the same nurse to pass me a letter. I looked at it and shouted joyfully: «This is from my husband!» The nurse corrected me: no, the letter is from a different man, as for my husband, alias Arosha, she remembers him quite well... I tried to explain, but she gave up on me, saying that she'd never understand who of all those men was my husband.

Then Mark came with Innochka. In the Soviet Union no one was allowed into maternity wards, so I had to show them the baby from the window. He was swaddled like a doll. On the eighth day I was discharged: this is the other Soviet rule. At home the usual baby routine started: bathing, washing, feeding etc. I wanted to circumcise my son, so Papa went to the synagogue and made arrangements for a home visit. Then we had an argument about the baby's name.

I wanted to call him Ghennadii, but my mother protested. She said that we should name our kids after their late relatives, as the Jewish Law says, and not after cats or dogs. She insisted that the boy should be called Joseph after Mark's father. I did not like the name Joseph, even though Stalin was then at the height of his fame.

Interestingly, Mark's mother was then in Moscow, and she did not insist on any particular names.

Passions were heating up. In the end, I was in hysterics. I thought I'd lose the little milk I had over this matter. Finally Mark managed to resolve our argument. He suggested that we write the boy down as Iosif during his circumcision – and then put Yusef, Joseph or Josef in Polish, English or French manner in his birth certificate. I chose Josef and insisted that this exact name should be in his birth certificate to avoid confusion similar to what we already had with Innochka, her being under one name in the papers and using the other in real life. Mark did as I told him.

On a pre-arranged date a *meil* with his assistant came to our house and circumcised the baby in our room. We asked Aaron and my sister Valia to be our *kvoters*, or godparents. The majority of relatives had already returned to Leningrad from war refugee settlements and from the front – and they came to the ceremony. We prepared a holiday feast and celebrated the occasion after the ceremony.

During the ceremony Valia, Liova's late wife, and I stood behind Arosha who was sitting with our baby in his arms. Out of all women, only the two of us saw the procedure. Valia, who was Russian and already had two sons, told me then that if she was going to have more boys, she'd like them to be circumcised.

I'll jump ahead and say that later she gave birth to two daughters.

We were already sitting at the table, when rabbis started singing *mishibeirah*, or toasts to one guest after the other, and each toasted guest put a donation for the synagogue into a box. When Valia's turn came, they asked her Jewish name and patronymic as they had done with everybody else. Our relatives laughed when she responded – «Valentina Nikolaevna». «Sha, sha», the *meil* said, «nowadays it happens that people other than Jews sit at our table, and there is nothing outstanding in it». Then he turned to the next guest without singing a toast to Valentina Nikolaevna. She was, however, a smart woman, so she asked my sister to bring her purse from the other room, took out a 100-rouble bill, i.e. ten times more than other guests donated, and passed it to the *meil*. He went 3 or 4 persons back and sang a toast to Valentina Nikolaevna.

My mother was mightily confused by this episode. She said: «If the Law allows singing *mishibeirah* to a non-Jewish person, he should have done it right away; and if the Law prohibits it, he shouldn't have done it for money». That's what happened at our place that

day. It is amazing that certain episodes stay in memory forever!

Our son will soon turn 40 – and I still remember that occasion.

That's how we got our desired and beloved son. We called him Josic, or Jhozin'ka. He had light hair, white skin, rosy cheeks and regular features. He reminded of a cherub. He was so handsome, that even strangers admired him. I gave a lot of my time to the kids, and they were not only good-looking, but also knowledgeable, well-behaved and smart, with a lot of internal and external charisma. Even in the times of hardships they gave us a lot of joy and happiness.

Mark remained in army service until December the 31<sup>st</sup> of 1945. I lived with my parents, and alone had to take care of two small kids. Mark only visited for a couple of days from time to time. Life was very difficult for me, especially because our living conditions were far from comfortable. I had to wash swaddling clothes in the tub at night, when everyone was asleep, and put them to dry on radiators in our room. The room was too small for us. Our 16 sq m did not allow even for two children's cradles. Mama offered to let Innochka sleep in their bedroom. This was also not a great idea. The dining-room was bigger: 26 sq m. Valia slept there. We suggested that we should move to the dining-room. At first, mama was unwilling to disrupt her style of life. In a while we insisted on moving to the big room where we could put two beds for our kids. Later Mama told us that she'd been influenced by Innochka. She was crazy about her and could never refuse her anything. So, when Innochka in her childish manner articulated her wish to change rooms, Mama could not resist. As much as she loved Innochka, to Josic she was completely indifferent and excused this lack of emotion by the fact that she was not used to boys. Mark's mother, on the contrary, loved Josic more and Innochka less.

Atmosphere in the house was tense and difficult: we had too big a family and too little room. Still, we did not fight or quarrel. I was patient, even though I suffered more than others.

Family climate was so unbearable, that for New Year's Eve we took both kids and went to Leva and Valia's place, to Ghoghol Street. There we spent the night. After New Year's Eve Innochka went down with measles, but she'd been vaccinated in kindergarten, and the disease was easy on her. The situation with Josic was difficult, however. Child doctor who was, apparently, not a smart woman, told me that, in general, a baby under two months is protected by the immune factors he gets with mother's milk and that he should not contract measles. If he contracts it, however, he may die, therefore we need to

vaccinate him. On the other hand, vaccination so early in life is also dangerous: it may also lead to his death.

I found myself in the crossfire: should I vaccinate my son – or not? The doctor said that in both cases he may die. The next day this same doctor came in with a registered nurse to vaccinate my son. I sent them back. Still, for the entire duration of the quarantine I was in great anxiety. God saved us, and our baby did not contract measles from Innochka. Apparently, my milk protected him. I was busy with kids and Mark was looking for a job. Before he left the army, they had offered to raise him to lieutenant-colonel and sent him as senior inspector to Germany. But his family could not go with him – and Mark declined this offer. Then they offered him to go to Riga as armored battalion commander. The battalion stood in the town of Baldone in Riga area. Mark declined that offer, too.



**Sofa with Liza and German Mussel – beloved friends in Riga since 1945 till last days of life**

### **WE MOVE TO RIGA LIFE IN RIGA**

Still, a trip to Riga left Mark exhilarated. In 1946 Riga was still a Western city. Unusually clean streets, many parks, abundance of greenery and people's polite attitude – everything was new to us. Cashiers and salesmen thanked their customers for making a purchase. We were not used to it at all. There remained a few small private stores in the city. Accidentally Mark ran into his old acquaintance Sioma Kolpakchi, and Sioma introduced him to his friend Aleksei Shalman. The three of them agreed to work together. Sioma and his family were renting a dacha in the town of Maiori on Riga Coast. He advised Mark to bring his family there, too. Mark returned to Leningrad and suggested that we move to Riga.

On the one hand, I feared going to an unknown place with 2 small children; on the other – Mark's stories sounded so enticing, that I agreed. Besides, co-habitation with my parents was growing more difficult every day. Mark suggested that we move to Riga for the summer, and if we do not like it – we can return in the fall.

Thus, I packed two suitcases leaving everything else behind, took my kids and we went to Riga. Back then it was like going out of

the country. Innochka was 5, and Josic – 7.5 months old. We left on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1946. In Maiori we went straight to Sioma Kolpakchi's dacha and they gave us one of their rooms. Soon Mark met yet another old acquaintance, former Leningradian, and currently – director of the Maiori sanatorium. That man had no family while his position entitled him to a free dacha. He offered us to live there. Essentials such as beds, tables, chairs etc. were picked up in vacated houses.

Various circumstances made our life difficult. Mark was working, but in those years wages were sometimes withheld for 2 months. We were forced to borrow a lot and lived very modestly. After the war we had no savings left – and there were no relatives to borrow from in Riga. We had to limit ourselves even in food.

In addition, Josic developed bilateral lobar pneumonia. I had no one to leave the kids with when I had to pick up medication at the pharmacy. Mark was getting up very early to go to the market for food and milk. Then I had the entire day to cook on portable electric stove. Not surprisingly, I did not go to the sea even once, although we lived very close to the beach. Innochka often stood in the gates watching beach crowd pass by. «Mama dear, why do they always look at me and say: «Such a pretty girl!» she'd ask. «That's because you are good and quiet, and you do not make any troubles.»

I did not have enough milk to satisfy Josic's hunger, but I could not interrupt breastfeeding in July. He was biting on my nipples so hard that they were bleeding and literally hanging on a beeline. I wept from severe pain.

Valia was a student at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Leningrad. On mama's request Mark arranged for her and her girlfriend a stay in Maiori sanatorium, and they were visiting us regularly. Seeing me weep, Valia would say: «Stop breastfeeding him, do not torture yourself!» But I knew that I had no right to do that. Josic did not like comforters, but he willingly sucked milk and liquefied porridge out of the bottle. He'd empty his bottle, throw it on the floor and smash it. Finding baby bottles at that time was difficult, and I had to give him half-liter bottles. He smashed them, too. For vitamins I gave him fresh-squeezed carrot juice, the cheapest of all.

This is how our first summer on Riga Coast passed. In the fall, when it was time to leave dachas, Mark's organization gave him a room in Bellevue Hotel, and we moved there. A month and a half later we got an apartment.

Our stay in the hotel was paid for by Mark's organization. They

offered us different apartments, but I was unwilling to move into the apartments that had previously belonged to persecution victims or to the Jews killed by Germans.

Eventually, we moved to a 2-room apartment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. It had no gas or running water and had a woodstove for heating – but we were its first residents. Before us, the man who owned the building used this space for his glass-works plant. His nickname was Red Ian because of his pro-communist sentiments. When he came to know the Soviet regime better, he changed his views drastically. However, he voluntarily gave up to the Soviets his two buildings and a glass-works plant. For this, they made him director of his own plant. Three apartments on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor were turned into residential spaces. Later this plant merged with the other, while 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> floors also were divided into apartments. This Ian, whose last name I do not remember, was a good, kind and decent person .

At that address – 24 Krasotaiu Street – we lived for the next six years.

Our first years in Riga were hard, especially for me. Because of children I could not work; Mark was our only provider and we were always short of money. Besides, I did not know Latvian language. The majority of Latvians knew Russian, but they did not like conversing in Russian with us. They were, of course, in their own right: for them, we were occupants. Therefore, they treated us very badly, especially in the first years after the war. Even Latvian Jews disliked Soviet Jews. Still, we found several Jewish families, befriended them and kept in touch for the entire length of our life their which was 32 years. But for them we always remained «the Soviets», albeit agreeable and accepted in their houses.

In our first years there Riga was like a foreign territory to us. It still retained some of its free Western spirit and that rewarded us for the difficulties in communication. Besides, it certainly affected our lifestyle and the way our children were brought up.

Initially I missed Leningrad very much. There we had a large family, many relatives, whereas in Riga we were alone. As years passed, I learned that friends are able to replace relatives in joy and in sorrow; besides, over the years our relatives started visiting us more and more often, especially in the summer when we lived on Riga Coast. Still, in our first years in Riga I used to visit Leningrad 5-6 times a year. Apart from everything else, Mama wanted us to be seen regularly around the house to prevent our room from being claimed by someone else. During the war many residential houses in



Leningrad were destroyed, and housing problem was very acute.

It took a while before I could go back to Leningrad for the first time. First we had to pay back our debt to Sioma Kolpakchi. I am very meticulous in these matters. Therefore, we found ourselves in Riga without winter clothes: I hadn't thought to take them from Leningrad. When the money was finally paid back, I went to Leningrad. In spite of our financial difficulties, I decided to hire a housemaid, and ended up bringing from Leningrad a girl named Dusia, daughter of Mama's friend. Her mother called her to the city from the village and dispatched her to Riga with us. With Dusia's arrival, our life instantly changed. Food in Russia was still rationed back then: to get food, one had to have a residence permit and a food card. Dusia, of course, had no such things. But she was a very decent girl. She ate what we ate, but covertly tried to cut back on rationed foods. «Why don't you drink tea, Dusia?» I'd ask. «What do I want this colon rinse for?» she'd answer. But as soon as food rationing was abolished and we once again could buy as much sugar as we liked, Dusia started drinking sweet tea. Only then I realized how noble she'd been.

In our new apartment we had nothing; no even beds. Soon someone – I forgot who it was – pointed out to us that a certain shoe-maker was moving from the city to the country and wanted to sell all his stuff. We went and bought everything they had: two iron beds, white cupboard, a table, stools, a couple of chairs, bowls etc. These were our first pieces of furniture. Still we were happy to have something to eat and sleep on. Then we started buying used furniture, curtains and drapes in antique stores. Oakwood furniture with walnut trimmings was fashionable in Riga. We did our bests to pick pieces of similar colors and succeeded in furnishing our bedroom and dining room in style.

Life was getting easier for us. In the summer of 1947 we went to rent a dacha: back then people still rented houses rather than rooms. We were lucky: in Maiori we found a large beautiful house not far from the sea. The owner's main worry was to have a grandmother or a housemaid on the premises at all times, because a year before the house was burglarized while all tenants were at the beach. This was one of those dachas with state-controlled rent that were available to everyone in the years after the war.

Emil' Mironovich and Yevgenia Ghermanovna had this dacha at their disposal for 10 years. They had no children. The house had 4 bedrooms, a dining-room, a veranda, a kitchen and various auxiliary

spaces. Our hosts soon got used to us and came to like our family very much. We spent 6 summers with them. They became our good friends. Because of their friendly attitude, our rent was very affordable: just 1500 old roubles. (Private owners would have charged 5 times as much for the dacha this size.)

Our friends could not believe us when we told them how much we pay. Yevgenia Ghermanovna was very fond of our kids, especially of Josic. It was a treat for her to take our baby out for a walk down Iomas Street, the main street in Maiori. I did not have to work: I had a housemaid.

Our house was open to all our friends. People used to come in at night, play cards and stage wonderful performances. Through our friend Bella Ghalinskaia we came to know many performers and musicians. Bella worked for the Moscow Philharmonic Society and vacationed every summer on Riga Coast.

When on Riga Coast, we frequented local concert hall and spent time with our friends who also lived in cottages by the sea. Life was getting better – and we liked it. The spring of 1949 brought more troubles. Every spring, before leaving for the coast, I took my kids for their annual medical examination. Child clinic doctors tested them for all basic body functions, X-rayed their lungs and tested them for Pirquet and Mantoux reactions. I deemed this annual check necessary because I had been warned that TB was very common in Riga area. That spring the doctors diagnosed our 3.5 year-old son with bronchoadenitis. Both his Pirquet and Mantoux test results were positive.

I asked what it meant, and they said it was the beginning of TB. I was horrified and started crying. «How can such a fine-looking red-cheeked baby be sick?!» – «That’s exactly the kind of kids who catch this disease», I was told. I left in tears and went on crying day after day and night after night.

Once I, my kids and our housemaid went to the bathhouse. After the bath I was dressing my son, and an old Latvian lady sitting next to us praised his good looks. Sobbing, I told her about the doctor’s diagnosis. She reassured me by giving me a recipe for a healing concoction. I had to mix suet, honey, butter, and sugar and boiled out cocoa drink in hot milk, and give him one teaspoonful. This «special chocolate», as we used to call it was far from tasty, but I did manage to talk the baby into taking it every day for half a year. In half a year his bronchi cleared and no doctor could believe that he ever had bronchoadenitis.

Old wisdom says that a child breeds. Our second trouble came when my son was 5 and Innochka 9.5 years old. She was a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade school student and attended second shift classes. One night – it was November the 5<sup>th</sup>, 1950 – she returned home, saw Josic sitting on a small chair by the door and cutting pictures with small scissors, pulled his hair and ran out into the hallway. Infuriated, he threw his scissors at her. They hit her leg. She picked them up and threw them back at him. At this moment he crouched and looked out into the hallway to see what she was doing. The scissors hit him in the eye and punctured both the eyelid and the crystalline lens. Shocked by pain, he flew out into the hallway, put a hand to his eye, saw blood and howled.

I was sitting on the sofa, darting socks, and noticed nothing until I heard a howl in the hallway. I ran out and saw that his eye looked as if a piece was chipped out. I turned to Inna – she huddled in the corner in the kitchen. Later I called Mark to work and in between sobs explained what had happened. He immediately took a taxi home. We took the child in our arms and drove to the First city hospital.

Doctor Ferber looked at Josic, and asked his wife, also an eye doctor at that hospital, to come in. They decided to operate immediately. I begged to let me be stay in the OR, but the doctor said that my sobbing would obstruct his work and that he'd rather have the father. I stayed outside, by the door, trying not to miss a single word.

I heard how Josic recited a poem about Souvorov to the doctor and his staff. Then he fell asleep, and I, for the first time in my life, addressed to God, praying in Yiddish that He helps my child and save his eye. Before the surgery, our doctor said that there was no guarantee that the injured eye would ever see. Both Josic's eyes were bandaged when the doctor carried him in his own arms into the ward and said: «I've seen many children in my life, and I've operated a number of them, but I've never seen a child just like this one».

Mark and I took turns at our son's bed around the clock. He was lying quietly, with bandaged eyes, and he constantly wanted us to read to him. So I read all his children's books to him until my voice became hoarse. And he was quiet, listening. When I came home, Innochka was pretty badly off. She begged me to take her to the hospital because she wanted Josic to pardon her. And I took her.

She saw him with his bandaged eyes, and she kneeled before him, and said: «Josin'ka, my dear, forgive me». And he petted her arm and said: «All right. All right, I forgive you». This was a scene never to forget. Two days later, on November the 7<sup>th</sup>, they took his

bandages off and told us that there was hope to preserve vision in the injured eye. I was so happy! I put him on the window-sill in the ward, and he was watching with one eye how people marched by to honor the annual anniversary of the October revolution. A few days later we brought our child home.

Mark saw his eye, all black and diluted from eye-drops, and cried out: «No, I cannot stand it!» This was truly a horrible sight. Gradually the blackness diminished, and the eye returned to its normal shape and color – but a small black triangle on the side of the pupil stayed there forever. November the 17<sup>th</sup> was Josic's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. We made a splendid celebration to mark both his birthday and his recovery. I never tire of thanking God for the good ending of this scary event. When Josic reached the age of army enlistment, he was released from military service because of this eye.

A year later, when he was 6, I taught him reading the same way as I had taught Innochka, using the same pictures and the ABC-book. There was a notion then that, for some reason, children should not read before 6. He started reading in 11 days, before we even finished the ABC-book. He started reading words rather than syllables, and soon it was impossible to drag him away from books. He remained a book-worm for life – until his emigration to America, at least. He had good memory, and even before he could read, our son easily memorized poems by ear. I had to recite a poem only twice to him – and he'd already be able to recite it himself, with pleasure and expressiveness.

In his childhood Josic was lisping: he could not pronounce the sound «sh». Once I took the kids out for a walk and started explaining how to pronounce this sound correctly. It was fall, and he had a blue beret on his head. I asked him to say the word «shapka» – «hat» in Russian. He kept saying «sapka» instead until he got impatient and answered: «beret».

I then asked him to say «sharf» – «scarf» in Russian – and he couldn't pronounce it correctly and replaced it with «kosynka» – «kerchief». He did have a kerchief rather than a scarf tied in a bow on his neck under the collar. His answers were cute and funny. When our kids were small, many people advised me to collect his funny sayings and put them in a letter to Kornei Chukovsky, children's book writer. He published his *From 2 to 5* around that time. It was filled with such funny quotes.

I remember, Josic was 3 and we were sitting by the sea. He was digging the sand, his back right under the sun. I said:

- Jozin'ka, turn the other way, please.
  - Why?
  - You may burn your back if you stay like this for a long time.
  - Burn it with what?
  - With the sun, I explained.
- He looked up at the sun, looked at me and said:
- I can't see where the sun keeps its stove!

We had a woodstove for heating in our apartment. And many other funny things he used to say.

In 1948 Innochka went to school. It was right next to our house. I paid a lot of attention to her studies. She did her homework only in my presence and afterwards I checked everything. She was a smart girl and had good memory. To prepare for oral reports, she read a chapter in the book and then retold it to me. Her grades at school were always «fives» – that is, the highest.

Her first teacher, Raisa Nikolaevna Lukashevich, favored my daughter – and Inna liked her. «I know that as a teacher I should not have favorites among students, even if only in my thoughts», she'd tell me. «But – what can I do? I like this child.»

Innochka was very attractive: blonde, with snow-white skin and rosy cheeks. Besides, she was smart and mature. But she was the smallest girl in her class. Originally Raisa Nikolaevna was from Central Asia. From her first marriage she had a daughter, Valia. The second time she married a young man from Riga – and came there with him. Her daughter was Inna's classmate and friend. They sat at one desk and enjoyed visiting each other after classes.

Unfortunately, Raisa Nikolaevna was undereducated, and even her Russian was illiterate, while in our family pure, grammatically correct speech was a norm.

R. N. was Inna's teacher only for 2 years, in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades, but Inna liked her so much that, even after she'd been transferred to the other school, she kept visiting R. N. every year for her birthday – May 5<sup>th</sup> – and always brought her a bunch of flowers. Until 7<sup>th</sup> grade Inna repeatedly expressed the wish to become nothing else but a country teacher. After a while, I started worrying, and I asked her: «What is so special about country teachers?» – «If no one goes to the country – who will teach village children?» she said. She may have been influenced by a popular movie. It was running everywhere and its title was – *The Country Teacher*.

After school Inna would change from her uniform, have dinner – and then play «school» with Josic. This game went like this: first,

she dressed him in her own uniform and tied his hair in a bow. Then he had to sit at his small desk on a stool, a pencil and a notebook lying in front of him. She asked him questions, for example: «Bekker, tell me,  $2 + 3$  equals – what?» Then she'd prompt him the correct answer in a lowered voice. Sometimes he could not hear well and gave wrong answers. Then Inna would scream at him, banging her fist on the table and exclaiming something like this: «What is it in your head – cabbage, is that right?» And so on. Apparently, this made for a perfect and detailed imitation of R. N.'s lessons.

I told them about this game when I visited school, but omitted unnecessary or unpleasant details. Also I heard from Innochka that R. N. regularly shouted at her daughter in front of the class – and even slapped her on the head sometimes. But Valia was a good girl, while R. N. had bad nerves. When Inna started her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of studies, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades were transferred to a different school – it was on Baron Street – where they had to get used to a new teacher. Her name was Nina Ivanovna. Inna studied there for 2 years. She was an excellent student and at the end of her fourth year received an honorary diploma for excellence in studies and exemplary behavior. About that time, in 1952, we managed to exchange our Krasotaiu Street apartment for a bigger apartment on Strelnieku Street. It had 2 rooms and a small servants' room by the kitchen. The former was renovated for Innochka. In the new apartment we had steam heating, gas and a tub. These accommodations made life much easier.

On April the 20<sup>th</sup> we moved to our new home. This was a gift for me for our approaching wedding anniversary. (We were about to celebrate it on April the 30<sup>th</sup>.) The new apartment had to be renovated and redone according to our needs and tastes. Renovation works lasted for 10 days, but I did not even have to go out of the house, because Mark was sending different workers, and my role was only to explain what needs to be done and to observe their work. Bathroom and kitchen had to be completely renovated. Instead of an old table-top stove, we put in a new gas stove with 4 gas-rings. We also installed a sink with 2 washing compartments; put a new gas heater in the bathroom – and so on. Previously our new apartment had no telephone, so we had to arrange for that, too. It was only due to our youth, good health and energy that we managed to accomplish so much so quickly – not mentioning preparations for a top-scale feast that took place on the day of our 15<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Most importantly, Innochka got a room of her own. Its area was only 5 sq m, but it was hers. Josic was six and a half, and we decided that he

was ready for school. Just then he went down with mumps. Innochka at that moment was about to take her very first school exams. As much as we tried to protect her, she got infected all the same and developed a debilitating form of bilateral mumps. She passed three exams out of four – and had to be put to bed with high fever. The fourth exam was literature. I called school director and explained the situation. He told me not to worry: she was such a good student, that it wouldn't be a problem to transfer her to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade without this exam. Innochka, however, was upset. «These are first exams in my life – and I cannot take them», she wept.

Her physician warned me that nervous exhaustion during illness could lead to complications in the form of meningitis. Fearful, I begged the director to arrange Inna's examination at home. He said that he had no objections. On a set date two lady teachers arrived to our house. They were supposed to represent the board of examiners. Her throat still bandaged, Innochka answered all their questions and got «A».

After their departure thermometer showed that her temperature had risen to 104 F. I went to the official meeting at school and received Inna's honorary diploma and a splendid characteristic. In general, we frequently received acknowledgement notices from school where they pointed out that our kids were good and perfectly behaved students. Of course, we were happy and pleased to receive such letters.

In the meantime, another education issue was waiting for us. Our son was very smart and mature; he read a lot and wanted to go to school. But they wouldn't accept kids younger than 7. I took both kids to School # 10, former women's gymnasium, located right next to our new house. School director was delighted to see our children. «Aren't they charming!» she said. In response I asked her to enroll them in her school. The director said that at the moment they accepted only girls, but that the next year the situation might change. She put Innochka in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade – and there she studied until she finished high school. Wherever my kids studied, I was always a member of Parents' Committee and actively participated in school and social affairs.

Hence, Josic had to go to a different school. The next nearest Russian school was School # 13 on Sverdlov Street. School building was new and spacious. But school manager could not go against the rules and accept a kid so young. She advised me to go to RAIONO (Regional Committee of People's Education) and to GORONO (City

Committee of People's Education). I wrote them a few letters asking for the permission to enroll my son at school. They kept refusing me. Finally, I decided to bring my son to the audience with GORONO official. I dressed him in long pants and a beret to make him look older. Wherever we went, he always had a book in his hands. If I needed to stop and do something on the way, he'd just stand and read, and would never nag me.

We walked into GORONO manager's office, Josic saluted the manager, stepped aside, opened his book and started reading. For a while I argued, trying to prove that he had to go to school, while the manager argued the opposite. Then she looked at the boy and said:

– Well, let's ask him. Do you really want to go to school?

– I really do! He said with a lot of expression in his voice. He was laconic, because I had warned him against too much talking.

– Well, if you really do, we'll have to do as you wish, –the manager said and wrote a resolution: «To accept». School manager was not happy to see this document. «You shouldn't have done that», – she said. – «It'll be too hard on him. He'll have to stay in the fifth grade for two years».

Against her predictions, Josic was a good student, albeit not an excellent one. From 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade he had a very good, experienced teacher, Anna Ivanovna Veldre, who had 31 years of teaching experience. In those years school curriculum included calligraphy. Josic was left-handed, while in the Soviet Union everyone was supposed to be right-handed. Therefore, at school they were forcing him to write «normally» – with little success at first, I must say, for his notebooks were messy and ink-spotted. His calligraphy grades were invariably poor – and that used to upset me to the point of crying. In all other disciplines he was ahead of his classmates. In class he raised his hand only when no one else could answer the teacher's question. Anna Ivanovna herself turned to Josic when no one else knew the answer. Still, Josic was the youngest in his class and 45 minutes of sitting still were too much for him. He was in the habit of stretching out on his desk, putting his head on it and so on. I had a chance to observe him myself during Anna Ivanovna's demonstration lessons. At the same time, Josic was rather eloquent and had good clear articulation.

On his first day at school everyone was invited to the assembly hall for an official meeting. School director, teachers and parents greeted 1<sup>st</sup> graders. From our distant corner of the hall we noticed Anna Ivanovna approach Josic and whisper something into his ear. I



stirred, thinking he might have done something improper. But it turned out that she had asked him to go on stage and greet the director of the school. Josic performed this task with so much ease and natural grace that the director looked at him in amazement. Then he took our boy in his arms and kissed him. Murmurs started around the audience: «Who is this boy? Who are his parents?»

From that day on Anna Ivanovna always appealed to Josic when greetings and congratulations had to be pronounced from stage. At first she gave him prepared text; later on she left it to his own imagination.

Once he complained to me: «Mama, am I their permanent greeter?» That was after he'd been told to come to the graduation party and greet the graduates.

When Josic was in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade we did his homework together, as before with Innochka. With the start of his second school year he told me: «Mama, I am not Inna. From now on I am doing my homework alone.» His independent spirit appealed to me and I agreed – but I still insisted on checking his work afterwards. He mastered right-hand writing, but continued to use his left hand for everything else, such as drawing, modeling and planning. Here in America I notice that every second or third person is a left-hander. Many teachers write with their left hand and no one attempts to train them otherwise, because, as they say, it is not good for health.

When Josic finished the first quarter of his fifth academic year, I went to a school meeting. Russian and Literature teacher told me that he misspelled words too often. I asked her for recommendations. She responded that nothing could be done about it. Outraged, I came home and told Mark: «How can that be? He is still a child, a fifth-grader, and his teacher already gives up on his ability to write properly! I do not believe it and I will not allow it!»

And I set to work. I told my son: «You will write dictations with me every single day, including holidays and weekends. I will teach you how to write properly». I had strong will and determination. The next day we started with daily dictations – and went on until the end of school year. I corrected his spelling and then made him write every misspelled word ten times. At the end of every week I'd give him a quiz for all words misspelled during that week. I would repeat this cycle again and again – until he'd memorize the correct spelling. If we had guests, I excused myself, took Jos to the other room and there we proceeded with our work. At the end-of-the-year school meeting I was content to hear the teacher of Russian and Literature publicly

announce the news of Josic's improvement. She added that she did not know what to make of this metamorphosis. Then I took several thick dictation notebooks out of my purse and showed her. She was stunned. She said that it was my heroic effort that produced such brilliant results.

Here I write only about most memorable episodes of the past. For example, in 1952, on the eve of Josic's seventh's birthday (November the 17<sup>th</sup>) we were talking about the impending party, when he suddenly asked: «Mommy, do you want to celebrate my birthday for myself or for you?» I understood what it meant. Our boy had grown up. He had his own friends, and their company was more interesting for him than the company of our adult friends – who, anyway, came in only to congratulate Mark and myself, while the children had to go to bed at 9. So I said: «Sonny, this is your birthday and you are free to invite whoever you want». He invited girls and boys from his class along with three teachers: Anna Ivanovna, Dora Solomonovna – the music teacher, and Sofia Israilevna Yavorkovskaia with her daughter. The latter was Innochka's classmate and our family friend. Our son enjoyed this day tremendously and he was happy.

One more unpleasant, but interesting episode related to Josic occurred in the spring of 1952 when we had just moved to our new apartment. Renovation works were on the way, and I could not take my son out for a walk. Therefore, I let him go outside on his own. In the courtyard he met a Russian boy, a few years older than himself. The boy went under the name of Vit'ka. On Vit'ka insistence, Josic climbed up onto the roof of a barn facing the other courtyard. Prompted by Vit'ka, he shouted to the Jewish boy named Lez'ka (Leizer) in the next courtyard that all Jews must be gutted and other disgusting things. Vit'ka, of course, could not know that Josic was Jewish. My son's blonde hair and blue eyes made him look more like a Russian – or, better, a Latvian boy. Lez'ka's grandmother and other Jews went out into the courtyard and voiced their anger at the unknown boy. They speculated about his family: what kind of anti-Semites are they? Soon we were ready to go to our summer cottage. We loaded our luggage into the truck. Josic and I were sitting in the back of the truck when I saw an old lady walking around and watching us intensely. I even mentioned that to my husband worried if they were watching us depart in order to break into our apartment later. Suddenly the old lady came up to us and asked me: «Are you Jewish?» By my looks she figured out that I was Jewish. I answered

affirmatively. Then she said: «What kind of upbringing did you give to your son?!» And she told me what Josic had shouted about Jews. She was Lez'ka's grandmother. The truck was about to depart. I apologized for my son and promised her to take care of this matter.

We arrived to the cottage and unpacked. Then I made Josic sit in front of me and asked him: «How could something like this happen?» I explained to him that he himself, and us, his parents, and his grandmothers and grandfathers are all Jews, and that by insulting the Jews he insulted us all. In the Soviet Union one's nationality was not a topic encouraged in talks with children, especially in Jewish families. Soviet upbringing suggested that nationalities did not exist. My son took this lesson very seriously. Since that day he fought anyone who dared to call him «Yid», even older boys.

For example, once Josic told me that one of his junior school friends, Vova Kazanskii, called him «Yid». «What did you do?» I asked. – «Well, I hit him in the face», Josic answered. And in that case I approved of his reaction. I always emphasized to our children that they are full-blooded Jews and have to remember that. When they grew up, I told them that they had to marry a Jewish girl and a Jewish boy. With God's help they did follow this advice – and this makes me very happy.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, 1953, we heard a radio broadcast about Stalin's death. At first I thought life was over. The majority of Soviet people worshipped Stalin as if he were God. Personally, I believe that a human being cannot survive without faith. In the Soviet Union religion was taken away from people – especially from Jews. Therefore, many of us worshipped Stalin. At the dawn of the Soviet period Jewish schools, newspapers, books and theaters still existed, but very soon all this was destroyed. We did not know any details, of course; we had to feed on rumors. Stalin for me was such an irrefutable authority that during the war, when someone exclaimed with fear – «What will become of us?!» – I always replied: «If Stalin said that we shall overcome, then we shall, and there is no reason for panic».

On the day when his death was announced I woke up my kids in tears and told them what had happened. Then I took them to Lenin's monument where a large crowd assembled voluntarily. They were all listening to Molotov's speech. Many of them wept and sobbed openly, and I did, too. I ordered my son to take off his hat and stand at attention, even though the weather was freezing. Later, however, I found out that even without Stalin life goes on.

I am not going to describe all changes in our government and the

struggle for power that kept passing from hands to hands. Every new chief unmasked his predecessor. Khrushchev, for example, denounced Stalin and ordered to remove his body from the Mausoleum. He did one good thing, however: he rehabilitated tens of thousands of people, some of them posthumously. Others were released from prison camps where Stalin had sent them to their death. People were told that these prisoners were all enemies and spies – and the majority believed it. Some of them, however, took it for what it was: deliberate deception.

Not long before his death, in the winter of 1953, Stalin decided to finish up the Jews by sending them all in freight trains to Birobidjan, the so-called Jewish autonomy. I know this for a fact, because Mark and I saw freight trains guarded by soldiers in white sheepskin jackets on Riga-Tovarnaia station. We were returning home from a party and had to pass that place. At that moment we did not know what these freight trains were for. Later we heard rumors, but refused to believe them.

Mark asked his former colleague and our neighbor A. A. Azhgirevich, a regional party committee employee, if rumors about the impending resettlement of Jews were true. «When time comes, I'll warn you», Azhgirevich responded. We were his «favorite Jews». Every Russian has a «favorite» among Jews. Fortunately, Stalin died and resettlement was cancelled. Our friends Mussels in Riga were so terrified and so sure that they would end up in Birobidjan, that they bought warm clothes for thither climate and begged us to shelter their son Yoseph before he finishes school. He was in high school then.

My dream came true: our kids were both at school. I always planned everything ahead for them. I gave so much of my time and attention to the kids that I wanted to see the results of my work. My acquaintances used to tell me : «Why are you in such a rush? – Don't you understand, that when your kids grow up – you will grow old?» I knew that, of course, but it did not scare me. In the meantime, I made every effort to give my children multifaceted education and interest them in music, art, sports and all things that enrich our lives.

They had no special gifts, but both took private music lessons. It was worth the expenses, because it made them love and understand music. When they were small, I used to buy seasonal subscriptions for us for the Philharmonic Society concerts. We also attended ballet performances and listened to light operas at the Opera House. We vacationed in Moscow and Leningrad – and there, too, I took them to museums, theaters and other places of interest. Mark and I both are

ardent readers, and we passed this love for books to our children. We had a decent home library. When our children grew up, they collected their own libraries. Education in our family was considered a thing of utmost importance. When Innochka was already a college student, she overheard someone complain that their kids do not want to study. «Mommy, how come that it never even crossed our minds to reject education?» she asked me then.

That's how things were in our family. In addition to music Innochka took private English lessons, and later continued studying this language at school. Certainly, I could not imagine back then that one day we'll be in America and knowledge of language will make a difference in our lives. I simply wanted my children to have broad education.

In those years I did not have to work and I could dedicate most of my time to children. For myself, I decided to enroll in dress-making courses offered at Officers' House. Children's World superstore was not built yet, and a seamstress who had been making clothes for my kids stopped working, because her grown children had found jobs and could provide for themselves. Therefore, I set my mind on learning the art of dress-making. For a professional designer it was simple: I could easily cut out any pattern, and I even helped my classmates. Having children of different sexes was convenient, because I could fit every item we had to make in class to their size.

Thus, at the age of 40 I learned to make clothes – and I am glad that I did. Even here, in America, I continue using my dress-making skills to make extra money.

Our kids were growing older and older. These were the years of confusion in soviet history. Most people's words had nothing to do with their actions, while their thoughts differed from both actions and words. In many families children shared their opinions with adults and repeated in public what they'd heard in the family circle. We tried to guard our children from non-essential conversations as well as from adopting the views of their 40plus year-old parents. We wanted them to grow up in a normal atmosphere. This is why our explanations did not differ from what they were told at school. They had no idea what was happening around us.

The notorious Anti-Cosmopolitanism Campaign was launched when Innochka was in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Many ethnic Jews were removed from important jobs or arrested; many Jewish military officers were fired – and so on. One day Innochka went for a walk with a couple of girlfriends – and returned in tears. I asked her what

happened.

«I am crying because you treat us in a wrong way», she said. «I feel a complete idiot who knows nothing about things that are happening around».

Her friends told her that their Jewish fathers had been persecuted: one lost his important job, the other one, a military physician, was forced to resign several months early of his retirement deadline.

I realized that our daughter was not a child any more and had the right to know. Still, I gave her a mollified version. I just told her that what her girlfriends had said was true. Thanks God, our family had not suffered, so I did not need to develop this topic. After this incident, we stopped trying to keep everything secret from children.

One day Inna said that Tamara Ivanovna, her teacher of literature, had asked her to prepare a report about «international friendship».

«She deliberately picked me (i.e. a Jewish girl)», she said. «What shall I do?» Then her father explained to her what to do. The resulting report was ideologically correct in its every aspect and it received the teacher's approval. I believe, this was the first – but, certainly, not the last – occasion when our daughter had to twist the truth. Generally, she was very honest and sincere, and she was not good at lies.

«The most terrible truth is better than the most appealing lie», I taught them. «If you tell a lie, I'll find out anyway». – «How will you find out?» Inna asked. «I can tell by the expression in your eyes». –«Mommy, please, teach me to recognize a lie by looking into one's eyes!» Inna begged. – «Only a mother can do it. When you have your own children, you'll learn to do it».

Inna's belief in my «visionary» ability was so strong, that it generated another interesting episode which I am about to describe. But first I must mention that, though we'd lived in Riga since 1946, for a long time I could not make myself transfer residence registration for myself and the kids from Leningrad to Riga. Every single citizen of the Soviet Union had to be a registered resident of some place. Not sure that we'll stay in Riga for good, I did not want to transfer our residence for a while. Besides, our room would have surely been taken away from my parents and passed to a different tenant. There was no available apartment because every room had a separate entrance. Even we still being official residents of that apartment, my parents' neighbors kept reporting our absence to the house management office and people with vouchers for our room kept knocking on my parents'

doors. Mama simply wouldn't open.

The Soviet law about universal compulsory education obliged every child in the country to go to school at the age of 7. In 1948 Innochka turned seven, and people from the nearby school appeared by my mother's door: «Where is the child? Why is she not at school?» Mama told us the news and we asked a physician we knew to provide a medical certificate stating that our child should go to school at the age of 8 because of poor health. A year later everything started anew. I had to bring Inna to Leningrad, and for the first two quarters of her second school year she attended school there. Needless to say, I was fretting and went to visit her every month. Then I took her back to Riga and told Mama that I give up our room in Leningrad and that I want my children to be with me.

The episode I wanted to relate happened during one of those visits to Leningrad. Clothes were impossible to buy in Leningrad, therefore I brought everything Inna needed from Riga. Once I brought her wonderful wool mittens made in German Democratic Republic. It was winter and she put them on and went to school. I warned her to take her mittens with her to the class rather than leave them in the school cloakroom. She did as I told her. At dusk I came to pick her up. She ran down the stairs towards me – and suddenly remembered that she'd forgotten her mittens in the desk. She went back. A girl on duty was looking around, watching for lost items. Innochka asked her if she had found her mittens. The girl answered negatively. I took both Innochka and this girl to director's office. Several teachers and a school manager were also present. The girl kept denying that she'd seen the mittens. Then Innochka declared for everyone to hear: «Better tell the truth, because my mother will learn it from your eyes anyway».

And she kept this belief for years and years. It became part of my kids' nature, and even as adults they never lied to me. Instead they chose to withheld bad news as long as possible, convinced that the later it comes – the less it hurts.