

## LEV AND HIS FAMILY

Lev, the 5<sup>th</sup> of Bekker brothers, was born in 1911. He was a strong, calm, healthy and slightly indolent child. He had to leave school after 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because in the first years of The Soviet regime parents had to pay for their children's education. There were too many kids in their family and father was their sole provider. Therefore, Lev and two youngest brothers – Aaron and Sasha – were expelled from school.

When the family moved to Leningrad, Lev and Sasha enrolled in a technical school to study for radiotelegraph operators and engine masters. After graduation Lev went to work for Severmorput' (The Northern Sea Route). Then he came back to Leningrad and worked for a while for the Baltic factory as engine-master on director's motor-boat.

Before the war Lev changed his professional profile and joined the trading team at the buyer-up station. A chain of these stations opened then in big cities. They were buying used and new items from people and then reselling them at higher prices. This enterprise was created because government-sustained economics could not provide for people's basic needs. Apparently, buyers-up made good money because during the summer Lev always vacationed in Sochi.

In 1941 he was conscripted to the construction battalion and then went to artillery school – but not for long. Very soon all cadets were sent to the frontline to form an anti-tank regiment. Lev was wounded in the arm; suffered partial loss of hearing, had to stay at the hospital and received several government prizes for fighting the Nazis.

When he was at the hospital in Moscow, Sasha's wife Valia came to the city, learned that Lev was there and went to visit him. Her relationship with Sasha deteriorated at the very start of the war. As far as I know, they did not even write to each other and did not consider themselves a wife and a husband. As for Lev, he apparently liked Valia for a long time. Once she told me about a remark he had made: «What a shame that Sasha met you ahead of me!»

Even before the war Lev used to help out Sasha and Valia who had two sons, Zhorik and Volodya, and could hardly make ends meet. All in all, Valia and Lev should have arrived to a certain decision during their date at the hospital, because it was straight to Valia where Lev came after the war.

They created a new family and had 2 daughters – Bella and Yana. Following the rule of the Bekker family, no one interfered in

their private affairs or discussed them.

They lived together for 30 years , and Sasha's sons lived with them. After all, they were not only Valia's sons, but also Lev's nephews. He took care of them and loved them.

Valia was a smart and beautiful woman – and a good person. She became a member of Bekker family at 17. Ethnic Russian, she earned love of all family members, including even Mama Bekker. Her own mother died when she was 18 or 19. Her twin brothers died during The Leningrad Blockade. Her father started a new family. Life in a Jewish family turned her into a perfect Jew. She knew how to cook Jewish dishes, she celebrated both Jewish and Russian holidays – and even learned enough Yiddish to understand conversation and to sing Jewish songs.

At Bellochka's wedding which took place in a restaurant Valia approached the groom's mother with a glass of wine and sang a song in Yiddish to her. It was amazing.

Bellochka got married to Misha at 19 or 20. She was still a law school student then. She was a beautiful girl, but their married life did not work out well, and in less than a year they divorced. Misha was Jewish. A few years later she married Kolia. Kolia is Armenian on his father's side and Ukrainian on his mother's side. Thus, their kids are a mix of four bloods.

Bella and Kolya had 2 girls: Mashen'ka and Yanochka. During her second pregnancy Bella found a tumor in her armpit. Lev and Yana were sending her the needed medications from the West. Physicians believe that the tumor has dissolved.

In 1975 Valia fell seriously ill. She was diagnosed with metastasized cancer in her lungs. The doctors said that she had only a year to live.

In the meantime, her second daughter, Yanochka, decided to go to America. She was 21. She studied at college at night and worked during the day. In her passport she was written down as «a Russian» – and so were all other Valia and Lev's kids. Lev instructed them to do that – «because this way life will be easier for you». It was a common thing to do among Soviet Jews.

When Yanochka was filling out her OVIR questionnaire, she wrote «Jewish» in the «nationality» box. Thus, she was permitted to leave.

Valia was a good mother and she did not go against her kids wishes. She did not want to leave herself, but she gave Yana her mother's permission to go. With Lev it was even easier: he himself

wanted to emigrate. He even started learning English. He retired at 60 and did not work afterwards.

It was painful to look at Valia knowing that her days are numbered. She became very thin, and, I think, she was well aware of her situation. In December we came to Leningrad to say farewell to Mark's sister Olia and her husband who were about to join their children in America. Valia went with us to the farewell party. She dressed up, made her face and her hair, manicured her fingernails – and still, everyone knew that her days were numbered. «Maybe we'll meet again», she said to Olia, «and if not – please be a mother to my Yanochka».

Yanochka left on April 30, 1975, and Valia died in May of 1976. In this case the doctors made a correct estimate. We attended her funeral in Leningrad. I was very sorry for her. She was only 56.5, and she lived 40 years of her life in our family.

Valia's death took a heavy toll on Lev. She was dying at home: he tended to her and did everything to relieve her sufferings. His little sister Raia also helped a lot. She was not just a sister-in-law to Valia, but also a lifelong friend.

A year after Valia's death Lev went to someone's farewell party and there met a young and beautiful woman, Sofia Dymshits. Soon he married her, and 6 more months later they joined Yanochka in America. Belochka, Jorge and Volodia stayed behind. I'll write about them in due turn in the chapter dedicated to Sasha.

On Valia's request, Yanochka stayed her first few months in America with our daughter Inna – and then rented an apartment in Brooklyn. Then she went to college, got married and gave birth to a girl. She named her Valia, in mother's memory. But her marriage did not work out and soon they divorced.

For a while her life was very difficult. Then she finished college and found a prestigious job in New Jersey. In a while she bought a condo apartment, and now her daughter is already 9. Yana met Lenya, and she seems to be settling down. As for Lev and Sofia, they've been together for 9 years by now. They live a regular life of aging Soviet immigrants in America. They have a good apartment, furnished with stuff brought from the USSR and partly bought here. They have plenty of everything and enjoy themselves. All they need is good health and good news from kids.



**Lev Bekker and Grisha Dvorkin – Betty's husband in the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War in Russia 1941-1945.**



**Valia Bekker with daughter Bella.**



**Valia Bekker – Lev's wife. Leningrad.**



**Lev with wife Valia. Leningrad.**



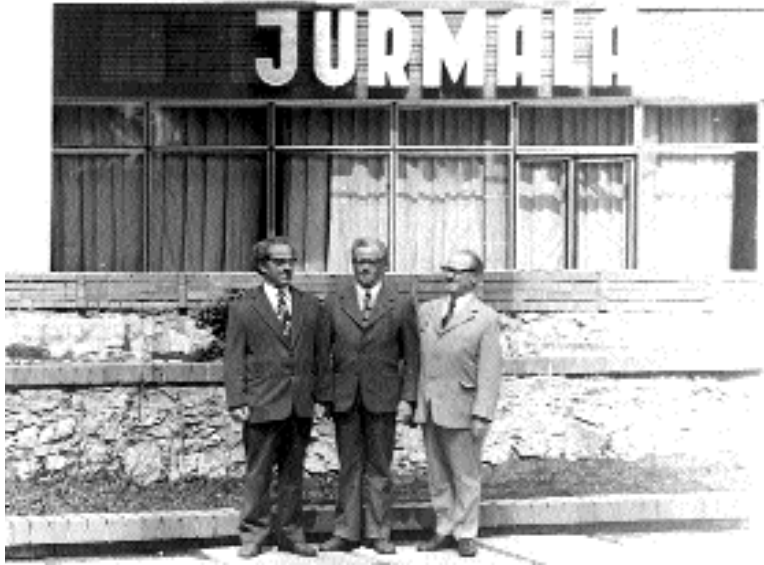
**Valia Bekker with son Zhorik.**



**Zhorik and Volodya Bekker. Leningrad.**



**Bella and Yana Bekker.**



**Senya and Lev visiting Mark at Riga's seaside Jurmala, Latvia.**



**Lev's wife Sofa, daughter Yana and granddaughter Valia with family in New York.**



**Lev with grandson Niki.**



**Lev's daughters Bella, Yana and granddaughter Masha with Inna at Sofa's and Mark's 60th wedding anniversary. May 1997, New York.**





**At the grave of Valia and Zhora Bekker  
in St. Petersburg (Leningrad), May 2002.**



## ARON AND HIS FAMILY

Arosha, as we call him, is the 6<sup>th</sup> Bekker brother. He was born in October of 1912. he was a tall, skinny, slender and quiet boy. In the spring of 1929 he came to visit Mark in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), enrolled in postal workers' courses and after graduation got a managerial position at the regional department of communications. A few years later he came to Leningrad for vacation – and decided to stay. He found a position of post-office manager in the town of Oredge (Leningrad area).

He worked at the post office all his life. But there is more to his personality. Arosha is a romantic. He likes poetry and writes poems himself, some of them pretty decent. Once he tried to publish them, but this attempt failed. Apparently, it was for the lack of education.

By 1937, when I joined the Bekker family, Arosha had just returned from army service. Army service is obligatory for all male citizens of the USSR if they are within conscription age range (18 to 28). I quickly developed very warm, friendly relationships with Arosha (as well as with other members of the family, I must say).

I used to ask him: «Why wouldn't you marry?» – and he'd say: «Find me a girl as good as you are – and I will!»

In 1941 he was conscripted again and served as head of army field post-office until the end of the war. He received several government awards.

He played a special role in my life. During the blockade, Arosha served on the Karelian Isthmus. He collected bread from army ration, dried it and then either sent it with someone or brought it to us himself when he happened to be in the city with reports.

It's been almost 3 years since I last wrote in this book. At home writing somehow does not work, while in camps we collected so many friends and acquaintances in our 11 years in America, that there's simply no time to do anything but socializing. We are very eager to see everyone, to chat with everyone, to spend time with them, because in New York our socialization is limited because of long distances.

But today I am resolved to continue my narrative. Recently my children have been reminding me of it with increased frequency.

Hence, I am turning back to Aaron.

Aaron is, no doubt, an extraordinary person, in many ways different from the rest of the brothers. All Bekker brothers share 2 things: kindness and inquisitive mind. In addition to that, Arosha has poetic, lyrical bent; he loves nature and all things beautiful.

He is very modest – even in his aspirations. He never cared about improving the quality of his life; neither he yearned material wealth.

Finding a wife was not easy for him. He found internal and external deficiencies in every woman he met. The war also played its role, of course.

As a combat-fighter and a military, Arosha managed to preserve «the Bekker apartment», as we called it, for the family. Then he decided that one of the rooms should be his by right, and that since he had a place to live – he could marry.

Once Arosha went to the theater and sold an extra ticket he had to a young girl. Naturally, they were sitting next to each other. This is how Arosha met his future wife Raiechka. She was 25, and he was 34. This was in 1946.

She was very good-looking. She had a sister. They were orphaned early, and it seemed that Raia was happy to be in a large family. She gave birth to 2 sons and added a lot of weight. Then she started ailing and died at 40 of uremia (kidney disease). Her kids were 14 and 9 then. She and Arosha lived together for only 15 years. That was their destiny. Raia was happy with her family, her husband and kids. Once she even told me that Arosha was as good a husband as Mark – and Mark was considered the perfect husband, I can testify to that.

I cannot say that Arosha was very much in love with his wife. I draw my judgment from certain remarks he made. Still, as a decent man, he overruled his emotions and took good care of his family. After Raia's death, he gave himself entirely to his kids and has not remarried until now, even though he has a sweetheart.

He educated both sons. In order to provide Misha, his youngest, with a place to live, he swapped his apartment for 2 smaller ones. Leva, his first son, married at young age. His bride was a Russian girl who worked at his factory. He went to live with his wife and her father. They have a son who is now a college student.

Arosha's second son served in the army and then married his girlfriend. They had a nice wedding in a restaurant, but their marriage failed and a year later they divorced. After a while they got together again, even had a girl together. But their problems did not go away and eventually they parted for good, leaving a child deprived.

Not long ago Misha married a young Russian girl. Both brothers had Russian wives. This must be Aaron's fault: he did not raise them in the spirit of Jewishness. Thus, nationality does not matter to them.

Still, life shows that sooner or later this issue does show.

Arosha lives far from his sons and rarely sees them, but they often talk on the telephone.

He has a studio in a newly-built residential area. He lives very modestly, spends very little on food and clothes and saves on everything. Therefore he has savings in addition to Grisha's financial help from America. This allows him to vacation 3 times a year. In the spring he goes to Kislovodsk, to the Caucasus; in the summer – to Baltic coast; in the fall – to Sochi which is on Black sea coast. In travels he meets people, while at home he feels very lonely. Part of his friends died, the other part emigrated. Besides, his bachelor's apartment does not provide good premises for receptions.

I believe that his trip to America 1988 was one of the biggest events in his life. Such a trip had always been his greatest dream. Naturally, he had no idea how to make it true. Still, all his life he studied English in order to be ready and receive maximum pleasure from a trip to America if it ever happens.

Unexpectedly, the window opened: the USSR took off the ban for visits abroad. People could go for a few months and visit their relatives and friends.

Arosha decided to grab this chance and asked Mark to send him invitation for 2 months as a gift to his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. We satisfied his request. He came and was enormously happy. All relatives did everything they could for him. Decent English greatly improved the quality of his stay. Wherever he went, he socialized with Americans; he saw many places of interest, received nice gifts from relatives – and went back happy and very impressed.

Now he is dreaming about a visit to Israel. So far, it is still difficult, but I am sure that pretty soon it will be possible. We hear that a group of Israeli tourists has already gone to the Soviet Union.

Arosha, however, is writing that, if Israel would prove difficult, he is willing to come to the US again. This is how he liked it here!



**After the war 1941-1945 still in officer's uniform Aron with brothers Senya, Lev, and Betty's husband Grisha Dvorkin. Leningrad.**



**Aron with wife Raia and sons Leva and Misha.**



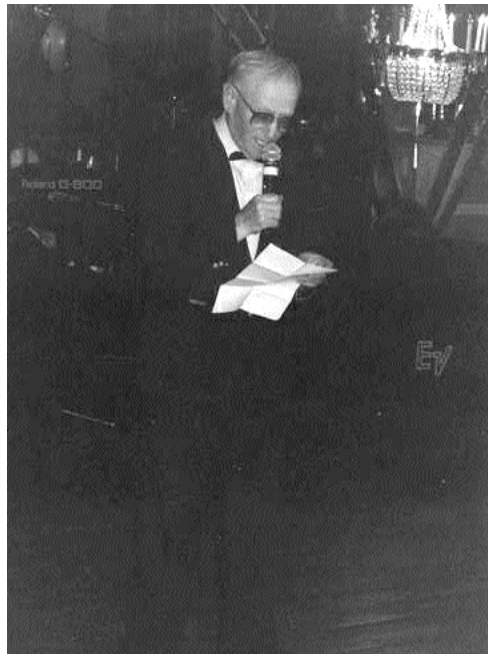
**Aron with son Leva.**



**Aron with brothers Mark and Lev reading his poems.  
New York.**



**Mark and Aron Bekker in New York.**



**Aron reading his poems for family and friends  
at his 80th birthday party. New York.**



**Aron and his son Leva with Sofa and Mark  
after 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. New York, 1997.**

## OUR EMIGRATION TO AMERICA

Now I return to our journey to Vienna and further to the West.

As I said earlier, we came to Moscow on July the 29<sup>th</sup> and stayed a few days with Senya and Fira. Then we saw off Jos and his family – and left for Vienna ourselves on July the 4<sup>th</sup>. Relatives took us to the airport. We thought we were parting forever, but the only ones we never saw again were those who died after our departure.

Kettie and Arkadiy, Mark's oldest brother, died that same year, in 1978. Five years later, i.e. in 1983, their son Rafa died at 45. This loss was a hard blow for all of us, for he was still a young man and a good scientist.

He left a good memory to his wife and his son Pavel who looks very much like Rafa both in appearance and character. As a friend of theirs says, Rafa was a personality and his son is a personality, too, in spite of his young age. Pavel did army service, and now he is studying chemistry in college.

The flight to Vienna took us several hours. Jos met us at the airport. We were installed in a hotel in the center of the city. It took two weeks to process the papers for the next leg of our journey – to Rome).

It was middle of the summer; the weather was warm and everything was new to us. We enjoyed Vienna, its suburbs and its places of interest.

Vienna is a wonderful European city, very beautiful and clean, and it has nothing in common with Soviet cities.

We visited palaces, parks, synagogues, Opera House; looked at the monuments, hotels, malls, private shops and markets. Vienna's overabundant stores scared us. There were so few customers and such plentitude of goods that, as soon as we entered, salespeople congregated around us, asking the usual Western question: «How can I help?»

In Vienna trams can take you to every corner of the city, and to make traveling cheaper one can buy discount cards. And we did.

Our son and his family lived in a private apartment. We visited them 2 or 3 times. They were sent to Rome a week later, and us – two weeks later. The passage to Rome was very tiring: we started off at midnight and were very sleepy, but there were no sleeping places on the train. Besides, it was hot and stuffy.

They put us off the train at a small station not far from Rome: purportedly, to protect us from terrorists. Then we boarded buses that were about to take us to Rome. Someone got sick and was taken to



the hospital, while the buses were standing in the sun, guarded by some Mafiosi.

We arrived to Rome at the end of the day. I was so exhausted that I almost literally fell out of the bus into my son's arms. He and his son were waiting by the hotel where we had to live. «Why do I have to endure all that?!» I asked him tearfully.

The road to Rome was very beautiful, but I saw it through the veil of my misery. It's a pity! – We'll hardly get to Rome again.

In the hotel we had a room for 10 days, and then we were supposed to move to a rented apartment. This was August 18, 1978. They gave us three meals a day and took full care of us. Almost every day we visited HIAS . This organization in charge of processing papers for immigrants going to different countries.

We went on excursions to different parts of the city and looked in amazement at palaces, piazzas and museums. We saw Coliseum and many other things.

In Rome we also celebrated Mark's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Our son and his family came over and brought some sweets. We opened a bottle of champagne «Soviet» and toasted Papa.

Our grandson Danichka was a year and 5 months old then. Our hotel room, as all Italian apartments, contained a bidet, and Danichka liked to push the button. He watched the water sprout and then tried to catch it with his little mouth. Of course, he could not know what bidet was for.

During one of our visits to HIAS my blood pressure suddenly went up. They told me to go home and sent an Italian physician. He gave me a pill that instantly lowered blood pressure, but wrecked such havoc in my body that I never took those pills again.

Our hotel stay deadline was August 28. We wanted to go to Ladispoli, a Roman suburb, where Italians congregate during the summers. We offered the hotel owner to pay for extra 3 days, so that we could leave on the 31<sup>st</sup>. In the meantime, Mark and Jos went to Ladispoli and rented a comfortable 1<sup>st</sup> floor studio, not far from the sea – just as I wanted. For themselves Jos had to rent a separate place because not everyone welcomed small kids and dogs.

We arrived to Ladispoli on the 31<sup>st</sup> and stayed there for 2 months. To make survival easier, Jos immediately started working as Russian and English interpreter for the HIAS office. As for Mark, he frequented English language courses for immigrants in Rome. We were stunned by the abundance of food in the West, and tried to eat as much fruits and vegetables as possible. We also regularly went on

country tours, organized by some enterprising Soviet immigrants who, for one reason or the other, had lived in Rome for a long time. Innochka even sent us \$100 for travel needs.

I still regret not going with Mark to Venice. I was told that Venice requires long walks, and my feet were not good enough for that.

Also, not long before our departure from Riga, we received a long, colorful letter from Innochka. She had described her trip to Venice so fully and in so many details that I felt like I'd been there myself – especially after we saw a documentary about Venice on The Traveler's Club TV-show.

While we were in Italy, certain historic events happened. The Pope died, the other Pope was elected – and soon he also died. The Jean-Paul II was invited to Vatican – where he still remains. All this we saw with our own eyes: we went to Rome specifically to see the ceremony of inauguration.

On November the 2<sup>nd</sup> we left for the US. Until the very last day I kept bathing in the sea. Heat-loving Italians shivered when they noticed me in the water.

Mark quickly got a knack of the Italian language and not only managed to converse with Italians, but sometimes interpreted for immigrants who were looking for rental apartments. On such occasions Italians would call from neighboring houses: «Senior Marco!» Same happened in the stores: salespeople knew him in the face and liked chatting with him.

I remember one episode in the HIAS office. Our case worker advised us to apply for refugee status. I was opposed to it. I tried to convince her that I was not flying from anyone, and no one pursued me; that I was leaving solely because my daughter had left. In the end, she managed to convey to me that it was in my own best interests to receive this status. This shows just how naive I was and how little I knew.

My other argument with this case worker was about the spelling of our family name. I showed her Innochka's letter with a return address that said: «Bakker». The case worker insisted that the correct way to spell our name would be very similar to the Russian transliteration: «Bekker».

Once again I had to agree. Now I am happy with this spelling, and I think it is the most correct one. Unfortunately, all three units of our family spell it differently – and that upsets me a lot.

Jos, for instance, writes his name as «Backer» because in his

youth, while he still lived in Novosibirsk, he believed that this was the way Uncle Grisha wrote it. Jos had to contribute papers in English to international scientific journals, and he started signing them «Backer». After that there was no way back: all his signatures had to be uniform. As for Grisha, he writes his name in yet another way: «Baker».

Hence, on November the 2<sup>nd</sup> all of us – Mark and I, Jos and Milochka, and Dan, and Pavlik, and Jinni, along with our luggage boarded the plane to New York.

By the way, I forgot to tell about Jinni's adventures.

This happened during our last stay on Riga Coast. One morning Jos went swimming and Jinni stayed on the shore. Suddenly a huge black male appeared and impregnated Jinni. Jos was very upset. He went to Riga to see a veterinarian. The veterinarian gave him some medication and advised to give Jinni shots to induce miscarriage. Jos did as he'd been told, but to no avail. In Ladispoli Jinni gave birth to 5 puppies. Milochka was a midwife, then fed these puppies. When the time of departure approached, she sold them for 1 dollar a piece. She believed that if she gives them away for free, people may decide to just dump them. She sold 4 puppies. Jos took the fifth to the Americano market right before our departure and barely convinced some dog-lover to take it.

Thus, we arrived to the US with just one dog – Jinni. Now she is very old and sick, blind and neutered, but she still lives with Milochka as «family member».

We left Italy at noon and arrived to New York at dusk. We were very tired, of course, but Innochka had warned us to prepare for a big party.

We were met by nearly all our relatives with cars. We drove to Innochka's house. On the 1<sup>st</sup> floor tables were laid with kosher and non-kosher food for 70 or 80 guests. Most of them were our relatives, and also – Innochka's American friends and acquaintances. She still keeps in touch with most of them. There were some important New York people among them, and all were interested to see newcomers from the Soviet Union.

I made a speech telling everyone about the circumstances of our departure and immigration. I spoke Russian, of course, because back then I did not know a word of English. Mrs Ruth Ornstein, Rabbi Ornstein's spouse, was translating. She and her husband came from Poland and she knew Russian. Five years later, when Innochka made a reception to honor her 10<sup>th</sup> and our 5<sup>th</sup> American year, same

Americans came – and I toasted everyone in English, without the aid of a translator.

This started our new life in America. Innochka gave us her bedroom, Jos moved into Ilusha's room, and Inna with Leva slept on a small sofa in the dining room. Not mentioning Jinni whom we had to take out for a walk and back in a closed box because pets were not permitted in that building. The place was crowded, of course, but there was no other choice.

Jos immediately started looking for an apartment and 12 days later they moved to a one-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights. Immediately life became easier.

I was taking care of the house: cooking, cleaning, washing heaps of dishes – doing everything a homemaker does. Mark helped me with everything and took care of all papers we needed to live in New York. He was doing very well, getting by with his English without the help of translators or our children. Generally, it turned out that we arrived just in time, i.e. when I'd just turned 65, and Mark – 70, because in America the age of eligibility for both welfare and retirement pension is 65. Had we come earlier, we would have been forced to work, and the only job available for us would have been care for the elderly. All immigrants younger than 65 took these jobs. Fortunately, we escaped this share.

We immediately applied for an apartment in Innochka's house. Three months later we moved out of Innochka's place and moved into our own. We still live there.

By our arrival Inna had finally taken her American dental license exams and, before even learning the results, started a 1-year residency at Beth-Israel hospital. She worked hard. Endless hospital shifts included both general and specialized duties. Sometimes she'd be away from home for 2 or 3 days, spending nights at the hospital. Then she'd come home, dead tired, wishing nothing but to lie down. In those days she used to say: «If only I survive this...!»

Then she received an official notification that she'd passed all exams – and soon she received her license. But 5 years of intense studies in combination with work and family concerns exhausted her so much, that she did not seem as happy as she should have been.

She arrived to America as early as 1973 and spent almost a year collecting information and materials about studies, exams, exam questions etc. No one helped her. Those who arrived later could use information collected by earlier immigrants.

Innochka worked at Beth-Israel until June 30, 1979, and on July

Ist already opened her own private office with a wonderful view of New York on the 69<sup>th</sup> floor of The Chrysler Building .

Now, many years later, she thinks that she should have given herself a break and gone vacationing somewhere.

In the meantime, Mark and I had to pass medical examinations at the same Beth Israel hospital. We were referred there by NYANA. On the day when we moved to our new apartment Mark had to see a urologist. Suddenly Inna called. «Papa has to have a test under general anesthesia», she said, «and depending on its results he might need a prostate surgery». Naturally, I was very upset and scared, and I started crying.

His surgery, however, went well. He could have done without it – but at least we did not have to ever deal with this problem in the future. Mark spent a week in the hospital. I slept one night in our new place – and went back to Innochka's. It was difficult to be alone in a place that didn't look like home yet.

Our luggage and furniture were delivered only in spring: the first container came in March, the second one – in April. Until then we slept on Inna's mattresses put on our boxes. We picked up a couple of chairs and a small table in the street.

When the luggage arrived we had to put furniture back together, for it had been taken apart down to planks. By the end of April our apartment was properly decorated and cleaned, and we threw a party, a combination of our 42<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary celebration – and a housewarming reception. All relatives came, and also a few acquaintances. Back then we did not have many. This was our first American party.

## OUR ENGLISH STUDIES

As I said earlier, I had zero English when we arrived to America, and, frankly speaking, I thought my English will stay at this level forever. First, my head was kind of «empty» after the stroke; second, studying a new language at the age of 65 seemed unthinkable.

Then one day I saw an ad in *Novoye Russkoie Slovo*. It said that Young Israel Synagogue (it was located right across the street from us) was offering courses of English for new immigrants. Mark and I decided to go. I was put in the beginners' group, he – in the group for advanced students. Our teachers were volunteers who knew English well. Classes were held twice a week. Most of the students were recent arrivals that lived in the hotel by the synagogue. In 7 to 10 days they had to rent a place for themselves and move out, giving space to a new installment of immigrants. It was early 1979, the year when immigration flow from the USSR was the largest.

Thus, students changed every week, and every week our teachers started from the beginning, repeating the same portion of curriculum over and over again. For my «empty» head it was very good. Endless repetitions helped me to memorize things better. In a few months I learned everything – and got bored.

There I met Augusta Zach and her late husband. There Mark and I learned about another school where they taught English to adults. We passed modest exams and were admitted. Mark soon lost interest and dropped out; Ava left a little later. I was the only white woman and the only Soviet immigrant in my class. We had classes on workdays, from 9 a.m. till noon. I studied there 3 winters in a row, and I believe that most of my knowledge comes from there. Studying there was hard: most students had lived in America long enough to speak fluent English, while I was not even always aware what the teacher was saying. Still, I learned to use the dictionary, and that proved very helpful.

This school operated year round, but I could attend only 6-7 months a year, because for the summer we usually went to camps. Therefore, I did not learn as much as I could have. Still, it helped me a lot.

Then I studied at home with my friend Ania R. and learned some more English that way. Then Mark suddenly decided to take a course of English at Touro College. That was in 1986-87. Naturally, I followed him there. We even studied in one group. I overcame all difficulties and learned quite a lot.

Now it is much easier for me to speak and understand American English. I feel more at ease talking to Americans. And still, commu-

nicating in Russian gives me great pleasure. I will never learn to express my thoughts in English as well as in Russian.

The following year (1987-88) we went to college again, but because of different circumstances had to drop out after the 1<sup>st</sup> semester.

All Mark's studies in America were just one winter in college, but he is doing great. He now feels completely at ease speaking, understanding and reading English. He can easily watch American TV and has no communication problems. Apparently, he has a gift for languages.

As for me, I stopped calling myself «mute» as I used to – and I am very happy about it.

## MY SURGERY OF BREAST CANCER

It happened at the time when I was still studying at the English school. I had already gone to bed – and recalled that I'd forgotten to warn Ava, my fellow student, that the next day I had an appointment with my physician at Beth Israel and therefore won't be able to attend classes. I was lying on my back, talking to her on the telephone. My right hand accidentally fell on my left breast. I touched it without thinking – and sensed a hard ball on the left side. «Listen, Avochka, I found some kind of a ball in my breast», I said with a smile. She said that I should show it to the doctor. The day was April 21, 1980.

The doctor could not even find it at first, the ball was so small. I had to show him the right place. Then he found it and sent me to a specialist. The specialist gave me a referral for a mammogram. The test showed malignant tumor, 1 cm in diameter. It had to be surgically removed.

I visited two other specialists. My son took me to Columbia University to see the last one. He was very surprised that I had discovered this small a tumor on my own. Most American women, he said, find them only when they are 3 cm in diameter.

He also advised to have the tumor removed. I also did not feel like leaving this rot in my body. My surgery was set for May 21, 1980.

I was 67 then. I behaved with dignity and courage.

We celebrated our 43<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary on April the 30<sup>th</sup>. On May 10 we were invited to our friends' birthday party. I was not showing a trace of worry, while Innochka was crying all the time, even at the party. I tried to sooth her, saying that I was not planning to die. I wrote a will, however, and I still keep it in my bureau.

Our children arrived to the hospital when the surgery was about to start. I remember, Jos was hungry and had trouble parking his car, therefore, after I recovered from anesthesia, my first questions were to him: «Have you eaten? Have you parked the car?» My surgeon was Dr. Berlin who finished his residency on July 1<sup>st</sup> this year.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> day they removed part of my stitches and discharged me. Then I came to the hospital clinic to take out the rest of the stitches. I felt well enough, and we resolved to go to Emanuel Campground. There we met many friends, and they all were saying that I looked well. On our third day there I returned to our room after a boat-ride and a swim in the lake. Suddenly I felt unwell. I took my own temperature and saw that it was 41 Centigrade. No fever reducers helped to battle this fever. At times I was semi-conscious, at other



times – lapsed into unconsciousness. No one had any idea what was wrong. They suggested it was some kind of poisoning.

On the third day (June the 22nd) an ambulance took me to the nearest hospital. With the help of a device called refrigeration-bed the doctors succeeded in reducing my fever. But I would never forget this horrible procedure.

I was literally dying – I think, that’s why they put me in a single room.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8th day I woke up in the middle of the night from the smell of breast milk. All my sheets were wet. Much later it became clear that my scar had «burst» because the doctors had left part of threads and knots in my breast. That’s why I developed a fever.

When they learned that my condition was the result of the surgery, my doctors suggested to transfer me to Beth Israel. This was the 1<sup>st</sup> of July.

My husband was in the camp. Every morning they brought him to the hospital, and drove him back in the evening. At first I did not want our kids to know about my condition, but then we understood how serious the situation was. Mark called them and they came.

Leva Grozovsky, our son-in-law, brought in his Volkswagen and drove me to Beth Israel. After a long and torturous stay in the emergency room I was admitted and they started treating my open wound.

On Innochka’s request Dr. Hecht, a very good specialist, took me as her patient.

I spent 16 days in Beth Israel. I suffered from fever-induced dehydration: my mouth, palate and gullet were covered with boils. I could not eat or drink; my insides were burning, and I survived on liquid purees.

This was the worst period of my illness. I lost 35 pounds. All my dresses dangled on me. Then Dr. Hecht left for vacation and passed me to the other doctor. He said that I should take a shower twice a day, in the morning and at night, and change my bandages after every shower. Even though I was very weak and this task was hard labor for me, I said that I could do it at home. On the sixteenth day of my stay they discharged me from Beth Israel. In spite of my fragile condition, we went off to Isabella Friedman Camp. Otherwise the only option for me was to stay in the hot stuffy apartment. In the camp I could at least rest in the garden. I did not dare to swim, of course – just took showers twice a day.

My wound was healing. It completely healed by August 25, my

husband's birthday. I was delighted and said that it was my birthday present to him. Unfortunately, the next day my scar turned red and swollen again. Jos took me to Dr. Hecht's office. It was then that she first discovered blackened pieces of threads and knots in my breast. They were removed – but not all of them. Two more times my seemingly healed wound had to be reopened and cleaned. Dr. Hecht said that similar complications happen in 5% of post-operative patients, and that it can last up to a year. Of course, I had to fall within these 5%! But she was right: a year passed – and all my troubles ended.

I still visit Dr. Hecht every three months. She is very attentive and continues monitoring my condition.

At the very start of my hospital stay Innochka wanted to pay her. She said that she does not accept Medicaid, but that she will treat me as an exception. I am very grateful to her. In another 3 years I will be eligible for Medicare and she'll be getting better pay for my visits.

Every April she guides me through medical examination. They do mammogram, chest X-ray and infuse a dye to check my bones and liver. And I am grateful to America for my medical care. Many Americans advised me to sue the hospital for overlooking pieces of surgical thread in my breast. I may have won a huge monetary compensation for moral and physical damage. But I did not even consider it. I think that all Soviet immigrants, especially the elderly, who never worked here, owe a great deal to this country. God bless the USA!



**Sofa and Mark with children Inna and Jos, New York.**



**Mother's Day – «Mom, you are the best!»**



**Sofa and Mark in the public library in New York –  
always reading books.**



**Sofa and Mark visiting Israel.**



**Lighting shabbos candles at home. New York.**



**Sofa at the carnival  
in the summer camp.**



**Sofa and Inna with Tessia Henze –  
«our American mother  
and grandmother».**

## INNA'S DIVORCE

10 years into her marriage, our daughter Inna decided to divorce Lev Grozovsky. On the night of January 3-rd 1991 I called them and asked Lev: «What's up?» – and he said: «Inna is packing».

I must say that this relationship had never been stable. He was stingy and very loquacious, and always irked her. He married late, when he was over 43, and he had been used to living by himself. Besides, from early youth he lived outside the family and did not receive proper upbringing.

He was very fond of their son Ilushen'ka – and he still is, I think. He was a tender and caring father, and was able to spend long hours with the child since, as a violinist, he did not have to be at the office from 9 to 5.

During Inna's pregnancy their relationship deteriorated to the point that she asked Leva to go away and let her give birth in peace. He turned to me for help, and at that time I succeeded in convincing Inna to change her mind, thus saving their family from break-up. But I could not repeat this 10 years later, by then I did not have much strength or energy left, and my daughter also had become more adult and independent-thinking. Besides, she was telling me that sometimes she did not feel like she wanted to live any more. Thus, she firmly decided to go for a divorce, while Leva was against it. He tried persuading her to change her mind, and after she had moved to the nearest hotel, taking her belongings in plastic bags, he begged her to come back. But she remained in the hotel until she found an apartment for herself. This took a month and a half. She had to buy furniture and all other kinds of things she needed to make herself comfortable and start a new life.

Ilushen'ka was nine and a half then. While Inna was looking for an apartment, he stayed with his father. Then she took over and hired a baby-sitter who arrived by the time Ilusha was back from school, helped him with homework, fed him and waited for Inna's return.

This went on for a few months. Weekends Ilushen'ka spent at his father's. Leva kept asking Inna to come back. Finally, he realized the futility of his efforts, and then his behavior abruptly changed. He grew aggressive. He denounced Inna whenever and wherever he could. He warned all his friends against staying in touch with her: «It's either her – or me». One weekend he kept his son from going back to his mother's. He threatened to take him away from her. He knew how deeply she loved him, and realized that this would be the worst punishment. When she filed for a divorce, he demanded

money: first \$ 10, 000, then even more – \$ 13, 000 – on the grounds that the process took longer than expected.

During this period Leva visited us a few times a day, unloading his soul to us. Once he said to me: «Sofia Markovna, I talk to you as if you are my mother, not Inna's». But it was hard for me to hear him scold and then - even curse my daughter, would any other mother tolerate this? – I did, for half a year, before circumstances put an end to it.

Inna was at our house when Leva and Ilusha came to take their tires we kept on our balcony. When Inna left, he said in her wake: «what a shameless woman, wearing this transparent dress without an underskirt!»

«It's July, it's hot, and everyone goes half-naked», I responded.

«She is shameless!» he kept reiterating.

Then Mark interfered: «How can you talk like this in your son's presence about his mother?»

«Well, I can», Leva answered.

«Then, how can you talk like this in her parents' presence?!»

«Well, I can», Leva said again.

«Then get the hell out of here!» Mark screamed, outraged, all red and breathing heavily. I was afraid he was going to have a heart attack – that's how angry he was.

When Inna and Leva parted, Ilushen'ka was 9 and a half. «I have no one but you, and Mama has Grandma, Grandpa and Jos. If you visit them – you will betray me». Thus, the boy was intent on showing his hatred for us and for his Mama.

This took a great strain on Inna. Sometimes she'd say that she could not stand it any more. Had she succumbed to these emotions – she would have lost her boy.

But she did not, and time worked its wonders. Ilushen'ka grew up, learned to think on his own and realized that mama is always mama. Besides, she loves him to the point of jumping into the fire for him.

They had to go through numerous divorce trials. It took a lot of time, effort and money.

Innochka wants Ilusha to be well-educated. For many years she paid his tuition at one of the best schools in New York called «Ramaz». He went there right after nursery. This year he finished school and went to University of Maryland, not far from Washington, DC.

Ilusha is now more patient and gentle. He is very close to his mother, she knows his friends, loves all those boys very much, knows

their parents and keeps in touch with everyone. To be closer to her son, she attends his school's synagogue. She is on good terms with all teachers and administrators.

In addition, Innochka maintains good relationships with all Americans who once helped them to find their grounds in America. They, in their turn, respect her and see her as often as possible.



## ILUSHA'S BAR-MITZVAH

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, 1984, we celebrated Ilusha's bar-mitzvah.

Innochka set the date with the synagogue two years before the event. She offered Leva to share the expenses, but when he learned the prices, he refused. Therefore, she took everything upon herself. First she made arrangements with a teacher to prepare the boy for the ceremony, then – with administration. She hired caterers, an orchestra, photographers and video operators. She arranged for flower delivery, and ceremony space decorations; she sent out invitations and took care of many other things. She took Ilushen'ka to Bloomingdale's and bought him a suit, a shirt, a tie, shoes and other accessories. For herself she also bought a very nice dress that fits her very well.

I also bought myself a dress for this occasion. Our entire family was very serious about it.

Jos's family also bought new attires for the occasion.

Grisha, his wife and his daughter Joyce with her husband Gary flew in from California for this reception. His other kids could not attend for various reasons.

The rest of our relatives all were both in the synagogue and at the party.

Innochka suggested inviting our friends – and we did invite several persons.

The ceremony at the synagogue was very solemn and beautiful.

Ilushen'ka was called to The Torah and read the text in a very nice, lilting voice. Then it was his father's and grandfather's turns. They were also well-prepared.

Then Innochka arranged lunch for everyone present in the synagogue. Guests socialized and greeted the jubilant.

What happened next, greatly upset both Innochka and our entire family. At the end of the lunch Leva took Ilushen'ka away to the shish-kebab party at his house where his friends were about to assemble. In the meantime, guests were also due at Inna's house. She wept and even wanted to cancel the evening party at the synagogue. I talked her out of it, of course. She complied, but it cost her a lot of health and nerves.

After a visit to Inna's house everyone assembled at our house where a holiday dinner was served. At night we went to the bar-mitzvah ball.

Everything was done in strict accordance with Jewish religious

rituals. Everything was kosher, of course. The total number of guests was about 130, 40 of them – Ilusha’s personal friends. Innochka took hold of herself and played the role of a hostess very nicely. She thanked everyone for helping their family to settle in America. Closest relatives and friends were then called to light the candles. Inna and Ilusha presented Mark and me with a basket of flowers. Tessia, who was of great help in Ilusha’s upbringing in their first years in the country, received a similar basket.

Rabbi Lookstein, Ilusha’s school director and head of synagogue, was of great help to Inna. This charismatic man, apparently, respects Inna very much. He acted as her first assistant, not as a guest like he does on other bar-mitzvah parties. Perhaps, his attitude was different because it was their first school bar-mitzvah for an immigrant student from Russia celebrated according to the rituals. I am not sure if there were any immigrant children besides Ilusha in that school. At least, not in his class, with the exception of one girl, daughter of Misha Raitsin, the singer.



**Ilya with his father  
Lev. 1972, Riga.**



**Ilya's bar-mitzva. 1984, New York.**

Ilya with his mother Inna.



## OUR SON JOS

My son's life in America was not easy: Danik was only a year and 7 months old; and Pavlik was 12 – also a child still. Milochka was very worried. While they were looking for chances to improve their life, money was short. They stayed dependent on NYANA for a long while.

Jos was very eager to find professional employment. He toured the country, visited different universities, gave lectures about his science – and received meager pay for it.

They found Americans who gave them their extra furniture and house ware.

Then Jos found research assistantship at Columbia University, in the oncology lab. The quality of their life immediately improved. University salaries, however, are fairly small. Still, a year after the arrival they rented a two-bedroom apartment in New Jersey. They also had dining-room and basement. As they moved to the suburbs, they had to buy a used car.

By then Milochka also found a job as a small-scale programmer. Her salary was not high either. Danik went to daycare. He was already 2.5. He had just started speaking Russian – and now he had to switch to English. He became nervous and whiny. After the daycare a cab was taking him to the children's group at the Jewish center, and from there – to the babysitter's. When his parents came back from work, he was brought home – or they picked him up themselves.

All this was very difficult and expensive. Unfortunately, we could not help, because we lived in Manhattan. While they were still in New York, we occasionally dropped by and stayed with Danichka if Milochka needed to go to a job interview.

Jos accompanied her, because his English was much better then.

In general, however, all was well with them.

Years passed – and Milochka gained work experience. Apparently, she is a gifted programmer. She was getting better positions with higher pay – until her salary surpassed Jos's. Besides, she was going through personality changes: she felt more powerful and important as a human being. She rose above what she used to be in the USSR.

In addition to that, every day she had to commute to Manhattan by buses and subway, because parking a car there was a problem. It took her 3 hours to go to work and come back. And then she had to cook dinner and feed her family – while all she wanted was to lie down and rest. Under these circumstances cleaning was out of ques-

tion. Milochka was growing more and more nervous and excitable – and finally their marriage dissolved.

We were too far away and too sickly to help. We advised her to find a different job closer to home or to hire a housemaid – but she did not listen.

Jos helped her as much as he could, of course. He can clean, and wash clothes, and he even learned to cook. And still – a woman has to be the mistress of the house.

In the USSR Milochka used to look up at Jos. In her letters to me she wrote that he was «the best husband not only in our area, but in the whole world». During their visits we used to ask her whether she wanted to go to the beach, or to the movies, or for a walk – and she invariably answered: «Whatever Jos wants...»

It reached the point when Inna and I asked her: «This is fine – but do you have your own opinions and desires?» She said nothing even when Jos was persuading me to go to America. «What do you think about it?» I asked her. «I'll go everywhere Jos goes», was her answer.

The only thing I am happy about is that I never interfered in their private life; never reprimanded her, never badmouthed her to my son. On the contrary, I tried to draw his attention to her good looks. When we visited them I never failed to mention how well she looked after giving birth to 2 children, or what a good cook she was, and things like that. Of course, I noticed all her deficiencies as well. But none of us is perfect.

Most of all, I pity their two children who had to witness their family fall apart. For a while I was hoping that they'll stay together. But 3 years ago, in 1986, we arrived from the camp and saw Jos's suitcase and a note on the table: «These are my things. Tomorrow I am moving to a new apartment.» I wept bitterly over it. When Jos appeared, I tried persuading him to go back to his family – but in vain.

He had long moved his bed to the basement where Pavlik used to live. Pavlik was in college by then and lived in the dormitory. Around that time he visited us in the city, and I decided to have an adult conversation with him. I asked him what he thought about this matter. «Probably, it's better for them to live apart rather than live together and fight all the time», he responded.

As for Danichka, he said nothing. Still, he knew what was happening and took it to his heart.

I called Milochka and said: «No matter what happened between

you and Jos, you are the mother of our grandchildren and we want to stay on good terms with you. I have only one request: please, keep from saying bad things about my son to me. I think, you are both responsible for what happened to you.»

So far, she obliges my request. She is very kind to us and keeps inviting us to their parties. Inna and I also invite her and the kids to all our receptions and celebrations. Now, that Milochka's mother and sister are also here, we invite them too. Inna does the same.

When her sister's family arrived from the USSR, we met them at the airport and brought to our house to celebrate Rosh-Hashanah. No one even mentioned the issue of divorce. Elisaveta Borisovna, Milochka's mother, first mentioned it to me in the early summer, at Innochka's birthday and housewarming party. She sat by my side and asked: «Do you know what happened between our kids? Why did they divorce?» – «It'd be better if you ask Milochka», I said. «But I remember her one time remark – it was even before the divorce. She said something to the effect that if they ever parted – it'd be because of her».

On the way back from Inna I retold this conversation to Jos, and he said that I was wrong. I did not go into details. It's too much pain for me already that both our kids are divorced – a hundred percent out of a hundred, as they say. But it's too late to talk about it now. May they all be alive and healthy. I personally have nothing against Milochka and will never say a bad word of her to relatives or friends. I do not like badmouthing in general – whether it comes from me, or from someone else.

As I light up Friday candles, I beg God to send health and happiness to our children and grandchildren – and to help our kids in their personal lives. In these prayers I always include Milochka. She was our daughter-in-law for many years, always respected us, was very attentive and caring, and I never heard a bad word from her. I hope, we'll stay on good terms with her.

She calls us regularly, asks about our health, sends us greetings for all holidays and anniversaries – and even asks my advice on her relationships with her relatives which are not perfect.

Milochka is not a talkative person, but on my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party she said the following: «For me, Sofia Markovna, is a model of a woman, a mother and a wife». I was happy to hear it from my daughter-in-law.



**Jos with his wife Mila and mother and father. 1984.**



**Joseph's sons Paul and Dan. 1985, New York.**

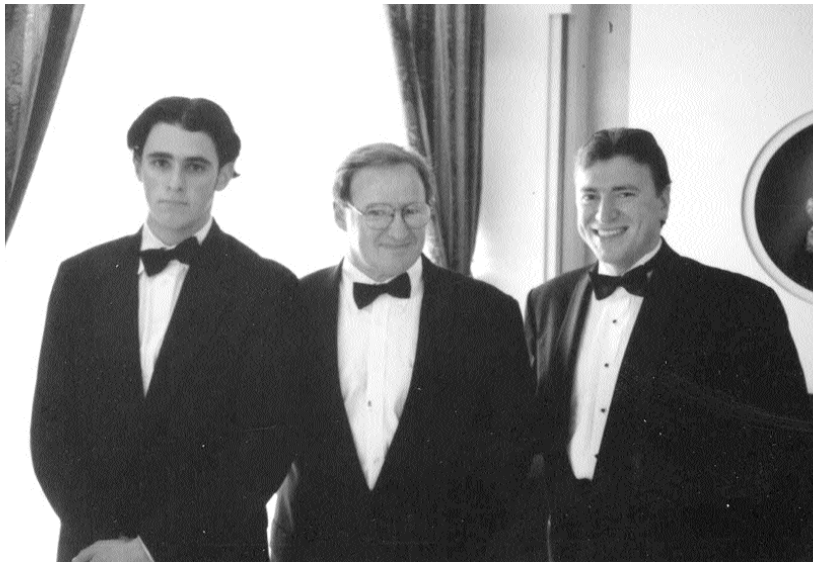




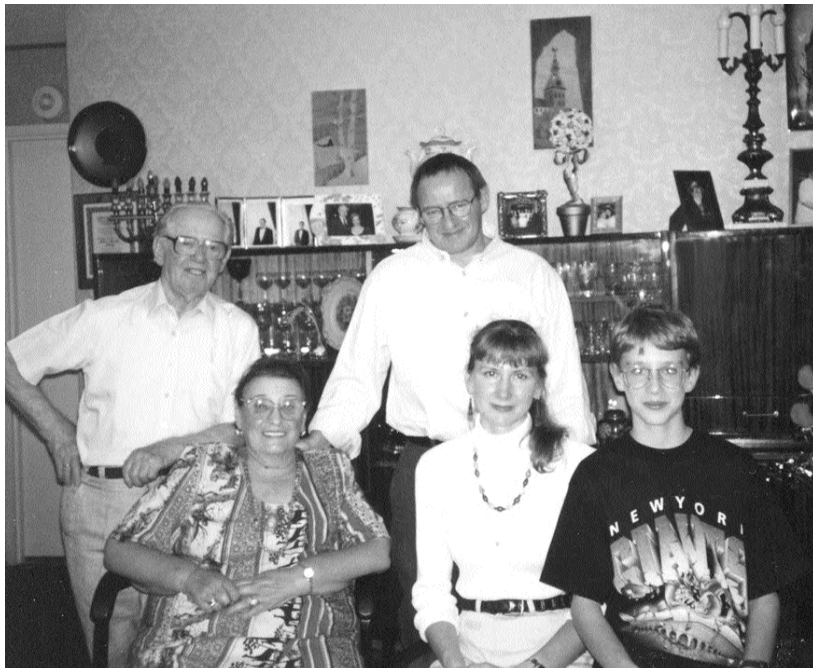
**Paul and Dan with cousin Ilya Grozovsky – Inna’s son.  
1985, New York.**



**Jos with his sons Paul, Dan and nephew Ilya. 1994, Passover.**



**Joseph and his sons: Paul and Dan. 1995.**



**Joseph with his wife Marina, Anton, mother and father. 1997.**

## SASHA AND HIS FAMILY

Now I will write an account of Sasha's life. He is the seventh and the youngest of the brothers. When I entered their family, he was already married to Valia and she was pregnant with their first son Jorge (born in September 1937). Valia was 18 then, and they registered both their marriage and their baby at the same time. Sasha was 23. He was radio station manager at the Printers Club. He went to work there as a technical school graduate. On the premises of his Club he organized Western European dance classes. Around that time he met Valia at a dancing party and she became his permanent demonstration partner in the class. Western European dances were popular then, and among their students there were people of both younger and older generations.

Valia was a beautiful girl, well-shaped and with perfect legs. Everyone looked at them when they were dancing.

They fell in love with each other and decided to get married. A year and a half after Jorge's birth they had another son – Volodia. While they were small, these kids looked like twins. The young couple found it hard to survive. Every now and then Sasha visited us on Lesnoi to borrow some money for family needs. Once he came in the late fall wearing a light summer jacket.

We had just bought a new winter coat for Mark and Sasha asked if we could give him his old one. That's how they lived. Around that time Valia's mother died of TB.

She had two twin brothers. They died of hunger during the Leningrad blockade. Valia's father, Nikolai Aleksandrovich, re-married and had a daughter with his second wife. He was an excellent confectioner and worked, I think, for the famous Metropol restaurant in Leningrad. After the war he lived in Tallinn, and then – in Central Asia. As far as I remember, after Valia's mother's death their family fell apart. After the war she had only one aunt left, and they did not see each other often.

When their kids grew up a bit, Valia started working and Sasha also found a better job. They hired a maid. Then the war broke out. Sasha was sent to the frontline and Valia sent the kids off to their maid's native village and herself stayed in Leningrad. I can only speculate what happened between her and Sasha during the war. I think their problems started when she went to work for a sewing workshop making uniforms for soldiers. Their workshop manager was Valia's girlfriend's father. He sent his wife and two daughters to the home front – and started courting Valia. She was young, beauti-

ful and full of life. In many aspects he helped her to survive. He even managed to install her in an apartment on Ghertzen Street, in the downtown area.

After the war it took Valia a long time to find her children. Finally she found them and brought them back to Leningrad. She was a fairly wealthy woman by then. As for Sasha, he was still fighting – against the Japanese this time. In the meantime Valia got together with Leva. I described this story earlier in the chapter dedicated to Leva. Upon his return to Leningrad, Sasha lived for a while with Valia and Leva, even though Valia had managed to preserve their previous room for him. Sasha, however, did not want to live there. He arranged fake marriage with some woman and sold her the room. Coming straight from the war, he had no other means of survival.

He met Shura and became close to her. Their only wedding was in the synagogue. He could not register their union in the registry office because Sasha officially already had a wife – the new owner of his room.

Soon Sasha and Shura had a son – Grisha. They lived with Shura's mother. Shura's brother was in the corrective colony, and his wife Klara and son Misha lived in Leningrad.

Shura, as far as I remember her, was quiet, modest girl. She and Sasha did not go along well, – or maybe he did not like her well enough? – One way or the other, presently he left her and moved in with Klara, her sister-in-law. He and Klara were co-workers. Naturally, Shura was not happy about it. They quarreled and blamed each other. In the end, Sasha and Klara went to Riga together planning to start a new life. Shura, in the meantime, decided to avenge herself by slandering Sasha in an anonymous letter to the authorities. Thus, in Riga Sasha was arrested. Klara returned to Leningrad right away.

Mark and I did not interfere in their relationships, but did all we could to relieve the situation. We talked to authorities on Sasha's behalf and brought him food to prison while he was in Riga. Then he was transferred to Leningrad.

Sasha served his time in prison and came out. He came to our cottage on Riga Coast to stay and rest. We created maximum comfort for him. Klara and Misha also visited, and we had to live all together in our small 2-room space. Our kids were small yet and I was not working. Therefore, we lived very modestly. Still, denying Sasha and Klara hospitality was unthinkable for us.

Then Sasha went to Leningrad, found a job and rented an apart-

ment. Their life normalized. They had a daughter and named her Ada. Their financial situation was improving; Klara started distributing tickets for theatrical performance and made good money.

They were very hospitable. Their house was always full of guests. Food was ready on the tables and doors remained unlocked in the daytime. At least, that's how I remember them from the time when they lived in Pivovarsky Lane.

Kids were growing and life went on. Misha was not very willing to study. He dropped out of school and went to work. Adochka finished school and graduated from pedagogical college.

Then Misha married Bella, a girl from Odessa. They had a son called Felix. Two years later Adochka got married to Tolia Toikach, also from Odessa, and in her turn gave birth to a son. They called him Zhenya after Mark's late mother. Misha and Ada were very close, and soon they made up their minds to take their families and go to America. They were the first from our family to embark on the road with small kids. As for everyone else, it was difficult for them at first, and then life improved, especially the money situation.

A year later Klara and Sasha also arrived to the U.S. Sasha had a weak heart, but he never thought much of it. He never saw doctors, never took medications; ate what was not healthy for him and above all was fond of drinking.

The combination of bad heart and a drinking habit caused him to gain weight – and then his life became truly unbearable. In America he finally decided to go for a heart surgery. It did not end well. Two weeks after the surgery he died at the age of 62. Not long before that he borrowed money from Grisha and opened a shoe store, but the store went bankrupt and Grisha's investment was lost.

Sasha died on August 19, 1976. Klara wept, and suffered, and repeatedly thanked Sasha for their «thirty years of happiness». She, however, could not live alone – at least, that's what she told me – and a year and a half later she found herself a man, also Sasha. This second Sasha's wife also died in America – and also of heart failure. He was Klara's age, very nice and intelligent. Unfortunately, one day he set off to work, walked out into the street, fell and died. It was horrible. A couple of years later Klara's mother died too at the age of 77 or 78.

Soon after Sasha's death Klara's sister Raia arrived with her husband, son, daughter-in-law and grandson.

All Klara's relatives, both close and distant, were in America, including her brother Ghena and his family. All of them adjusted well

and had decent lives. Only Raia, Klara's sister, could not get used to her new situation. She was nostalgic for her old life and Leningrad. A few years later she got sick and died of liver cancer.

So, in a short period of time Klara buried four closest persons in her life.

Klara herself is also sickly. She has several serious diseases, including horrible diabetes that tortures her constantly.

In spite of that, she worked at her daughter Ada's ready-made garment store, and there was good money in that job. The store Ada and Tolya opened first sold men's apparel and was very successful. Then Adochka gave birth to their second son who was called after her Dad – Sasha. Then they opened four or five other clothes stores for both men and women.

Ada independently managed a chain of women's apparel stores. She purchased goods directly from Italy and business was going well at first. Then it somehow started stalling. She was left with just one store, and then closed that one too.

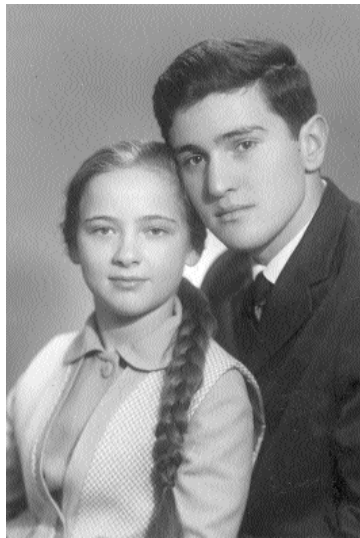
She divorced Tolya and not long ago sold their luxury mansion on Long Island. They say she is planning to buy an apartment in Manhattan. Her older son Zhenya dropped out of school and is now working. Their second son lives with her.

Misha, Klara's son, also was very successful for a while. Their second son was born in America. His name is Jacob, because Sasha's Jewish name was Yakov. First Misha worked as trousers cutter and earned quite a lot; later he and his wife opened their own children's clothing store. First it brought good profits, then business slowed down and they had to close the store.

Misha's biological father visited Misha in America. He passed away recently and left a good fortune to his son. If Misha manages to lay hands on his inheritance, he'll be able to patch up his business.

That's what I have to say about Sasha and his family. Sasha was a kind, good and compliant person. He lived and worked very quietly, without a word, and circumstances of his life were such that he was forced to drink in excess. In the Soviet Union he lived in constant fear – and the result of it was his death at relatively young age.

**Sasha Bekker with wife Klara, son Misha and daughter Ada.**





**Brothers Senya, Sasha, Mark, Lev and Arkadiy Bekker. Moscow.**



**Sasha dancing with Lev and Grisha Dvorkin (Betty's husband). 1966.**

**Sasha, Klara, Grisha (George), Olga, Lev. 1959, Leningrad.**







**Sasha and Grisha (George) in Inna's apartment. 1974, New York.**



**Klara and Ada with Sofa and Mark at their 60th wedding anniversary.  
May 1997, New York.**

## BETTY AND HER FAMILY

It's been almost 2 years since I stopped working on my memoirs. For some reason, I did not feel like writing. Today I decided to continue this work and finish it after all, since it already took so much of my time and effort. Moreover that little is left to say: all my husband's brothers are accounted for, only sisters remain. I'll start with Betty (Betia), the eldest. She died a year ago, on August 17, 1990.

After the seven boys, Betty was the first female child born into the family. She was always everyone's favorite as a child. She was very beautiful, smart, kind and generally a good person. She was born on June the 20<sup>th</sup>, 1915 in Odessa. All Bekker siblings were born there. She studied at school, then at technical college. She had an inquisitive mind. Already an adult, she took English courses at different places.

At 20 she got married to Grisha Dvorkin, her old flame, who was the resident of Moscow. He was a good, enterprising fellow with a rather peculiar personality. At times he could be difficult, though he always tried to make his family happy.

With his talents he would have been very successful had he arrived to America at young age. While in the Soviet Union he always ran into trouble; suffered himself and made his kin to suffer.

They had two daughters – Milochka and Irochka. Their family never moved out of Moscow. Daughters went to college and got married. The Dvorkin family lived on Gor'kogho Street, next to the central post-office, in a smallish apartment created by Grisha himself after the war from the ruins of an old barn. Their house was always full of guests – relatives and friends.

They were very hospitable; therefore they always suffered from lack of space. Later Grisha managed to buy three coop apartments. He bought them one by one, of course: first for the daughters, then for themselves. All three places were located in one residential complex.

Having lived most of their lives in horrible residential conditions, they could finally relax.

Their oldest daughter Milochka (her full name was Malvina) got married to Ghena V., an army officer. He had no higher education and she did her best to make him study and graduate from Military Academy. By the way, Ghena is from the family of the military. And she achieved her goal. At the same time they got a three-room coop apartment, renovated and furnished it very nicely – with Grisha's help. Of course, Milochka gave birth to 2 sons: Marik and Oleg. Thus, it seems, all was fine with them.

After 20 years of life together Milochka's family fell apart. Ghena vacationed somewhere and met an older woman. He betrayed his wife with her and, upon his return, told Milochka about it. She was a proud woman and could not forgive him, while his lover – she was Russian – would not leave him alone. She kept calling, asking him to come over. Thus, he left home and moved in with his lover. Milochka was so shattered that she developed cancer of the ovaries and died at the age of 47, on August 1, 1987. Her younger son was 16 then. The other son, Marik, was already married and had his own son called, after his grandfather, Grigorii.

Further I will write about Grigorii Dvorkin's death.

Grisha Dvorkin was a tall, large man. He liked eating well and always drank a lot of non-alcoholic beverages. We were always wondering how his kidneys could process so much fluid. Eventually, he was diagnosed with kidney disease. For a long while he suffered from this plight. He needed regular dialysis, but in the Soviet Union dialysis equipment was scarce.

Betty asked Inna, who was by then in America, to find dialysis installation for them. And she could have purchased it – but delivery to the Soviet Union was not feasible. Therefore, after many years of suffering, Grisha died in May 1978 at the age of 67. Mark attended his funeral in Moscow, and I was indisposed and stayed at home.

Betty was a devout wife. When Grisha was hospitalized she spent days and nights by his side. Once they were taking his blood, it splashed on a small cut on her hand – and Betty got infected. When we were leaving in 1978, she was already admitted to the infectious disease department to treat this infection. Infection persisted for many years until she died of it on August 17, 1990, at the age of 75. She was very weak, but they still dressed her and helped her into her armchair.

All relatives, including those from Leningrad, came to celebrate her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. This took place on July the 20<sup>th</sup>. As Aaron wrote, it looked more like a farewell party. And truly, in 27 days Betty passed away. We were in the camp, and I learned this news from Innochka upon our return. I was shaken and fearful of delivering the sad news to Mark.

In a couple of days, after some preliminary preparation, I did tell him.

His reaction surpassed my worst fears. He screamed and wept hysterically. He flung himself about the room and shouted that he should have been told sooner; that he would have flown there and

helped, etc. – even though it was clear that there was nothing to be done about it.

Betty was his favorite sister, his kindred spirit, and her death was a disaster for him. A little before that I wrote her a letter. Mark added a note, inviting her to come and visit us. He said that if she found it difficult to travel alone she could bring Ira, her daughter, and that in America they may even cure her. She responded that she was too weak for travel, but she'd be happy if we send invitation to Irochka.

Thus, Inna sent Irochka invitation for one-month visit. On October 8, 1990, she arrived. The entire Bekker family welcomed her and everyone, including Uncle Grisha, gave her many gifts. She bought many nice things and gifts for her family. She was happy about her trip. Also she told us that her nephew Oleg, Milochka's younger son, wanted to come on tourist visa and stay in America for good. No one, however, wished to take responsibility for a 20-year-old boy. At times even one's own kids are too much to cope with.

Then Oleg arranged invitation through some kind of Society and came over anyway. Innochka is particularly attentive to him: she sends him money and clothes and calls him every once in a while. He is her son's Ilusha's age. He is now in California and we haven't seen him yet, though we talked on the phone and offered him to be our guest when he is in New York. But his plans changed and he stayed in California for now. Hopefully, he'll persevere and get permission to work in the US. For him this is top priority.

That's what I have to say about Betty's family. Yesterday we lit up a candle for the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of Betty's death.

As for Irochka, she married Boris Usmansky, Grisha's friends' nephew. Initially her marriage was fine, but then she realized that they were too different and that her life was empty. Whether she first made this conclusion and then met a more suitable man called Yura, or it was the other way around – I do not know. But the fact is, as soon as she divorced Boris, Yura died in a motorcycle accident. What a whim of fate! Thus, Ira stayed alone with her son Zhenya and never re-married. She met men from time to time, but her father Grisha did not like them for this or the other reason.

Ira was born in early 1946. Interestingly, after the war we were returning to Leningrad from Tbilisi and met in Moscow, at Betty's. Raia, Mark's youngest sister, was also there. Betty, Raia and I were pregnant. Raia gave birth to her second son Yura on October 17, 1945; Betty gave birth to her second daughter Ira, and I gave birth to Jos – that is, got what we wanted, because we already had a girl.

Later Raia had a third child, a girl. As for Grisha, he wanted a son, not a girl. He did not even go to the hospital to meet Irochka and for a whole year did not approach the baby. Then, of course, he fell in love with her because she looked very much like him: tall, large and heavy – and even in character took after him.



Betty with brothers Mark, Aron, Lev, Sasha, Senya, Arkadiy. 1933.





**Betty with her husband Grisha Dvorkin.**



**Betty's husband Grisha Dvorkin with Lev, Senya, Sasha  
and Olga's husband Semen Budnevich.**

**Betty's daughters**



**Mila**



**Ira**



**Betty with Ira**





**Ira with her late sister Mila's sons Mark, Oleg and grandson Grisha.  
Moscow.**



**Oleg with cousins Ilya Grozovsky and Zhenya Bekker at 60th wedding  
anniversary of Sofa and Mark Bekker. May 1997, New York.**



**Ira and her family: son Zhenya, his wife Nadia, granddaughters Lena  
and Sasha with Joyce and Inna. Moscow, 2002.**

## OLGA AND HER FAMILY

Once again, 10 months passed and I haven't written a word. I should finish this account soon: it's become too long.

Hence, it is time to talk about Olia. She is Mark's second sister, born on May 17, 1918, the ninth child in the Bekker family. She was a very peculiar child. She finished school and graduated from technical college. At 20 she got married to Misha Bogorad.

She was a pretty blooming girl, and she did not look anything like a Jew. At our wedding my mother looked at her and asked Mark: «Who is this shiksa?»

Olia's wedding was celebrated on her birthday: 17.05.38. The reception was held in Pavlovsk, in Misha's parents' apartment, and it happened so that both their kids – son and daughter – married in one day. Olia and Misha's wedding was combined with the wedding of Ida, Misha's sister.

I recall our wedding gift to Olia: a lamp-shade made of green silk. Previously we discussed what kind of present each of us should buy.

I must say that Olia and Misha were not very happy. He was from a simple primitive family, and no one liked it, especially Mark's mother. A year later, on April 7, 1939 their daughter Alla was born. During childbirth Olia got sepsis and for a while was on the verge of dying. Her maternity ward was on the Vyborg Side, in Leningrad. When my mother learned what was happening she became so agitated that Mark and I found Professor Khlebnikov, a famous gynecologist, and brought him to the hospital. He helped to bring Olia back to life.

Olia and Misha's relationship continued deteriorating. Once Olia came to her mother with her child in tow and said that she did not want to go back. Mama Bekker refused to take her in. «Once married – stay married», she said.

Olia had to go back. Then Misha received a room in Pushkino (former Detskoie Selo) as a grant from work. The place was terribly drab and poor. I saw it once when I came to Allochka's birthday straight from work. This was April 7, 1941. I was pregnant with Innochka. She was to be born in 2 months. Mark was in the army going through with his field training.

The time was right before the war, tension and anxiety hanging in the air.

When the war broke out, Misha sent Olia and the child to Sverdlovsk. Later he transferred Mama Bekker and Raia from Ufa to

Sverdlovsk. Olia got pregnant again and on November 24, 1942, in horrible wartime conditions she gave birth to their son Lenya. Misha loved Olia in his own way, but was rude and kept cheating on her with different women. Olia, in the meantime, made a good career: she rose to the position of director of the biggest kitchen-plant in Sverdlovsk. She had great authority and was very respected.

After the war Misha was re-assigned to a different location. He took his family there, while Mama Bekker was brought back to Leningrad.

Then Olia and Misha also returned to Leningrad – and thus their «housing epic» (as they called housing problems in the USSR) began. Initially they had one trashy dark room. Through a series of deals they managed to get a nice, though smallish, apartment.

Kids were growing and studying, while Olia's relationship with Misha was getting worse. He acquired a permanent lover, and she saw them with her own eyes. After that Olia resolved to divorce him, and did just that.

Not long before their divorce Allochka met an interesting young man – and soon married him. His name was Viktor. I think, he was something of a nephew of Samuil Marshak, the writer. Their marriage lasted no longer than 4 months. It did not work out – I am not sure why. They divorced, but Allochka was already pregnant. She went for an abortion. At 20 or 21 it was a scary enterprise. With God's help, everything worked out fine and her fears ended.

Allochka was our first niece to get married. We came to her wedding from Riga. Therefore, we lamented her divorce. In a little while – a year and a half or 2 years later – she got married again – to Alik.

They also had a problem with a place to live. Such issues are the eternal presence in the lives of Soviet citizens.

Soon Allochka gave birth to her first son Garrik, and on our next visit to Leningrad we took Olia and went to meet the baby. Allochka was sitting with the baby in her arms, looking exhausted and unhappy.

A little more time passed – and Allochka divorced her second husband, too. This time she was left with the child.

In all her years in the USSR Olia helped her daughter financially, compensating her for the absence of physical help. Olia always said that baby care was not her favorite job.

By then Olia was already married to Semyon Budnevich. They met at the synagogue on Simcha-Torah day. Her son Lenya grew up and served in the army in Tbilisi where he kept in touch with our

friends the Amirkhanovs. When he came back to Leningrad, Olia somehow managed to get an apartment for Lenya and Allochka to share. They were on good terms, so it was better for them. Olia, of course, kept supporting them financially.

More time passed – and Alla met Arkadii who was divorced and had a child from his first marriage.

In 1970 Allochka and Arkadii got married and she gave birth to her second son Ilusha. I can't say that she was happy, but at least she had a family.

I heard her speculate on the subject of her personal life. She said that, if it was possible to take the best traits from all 3 of her husbands and combine them in one person, she might come to like that person. And, since in reality she had no chance of meeting such a person, she had to do with whatever she had. *C'est la vie*.

As for Lenya Bogorad, he also had an interesting life.

After the army he met a girl who eventually became his wife. Because of her, he broke up his friendship with Ghena Fikher (Klara Bekker's brother) who had also fancied that girl. She chose Lenya.

Lenya and Ghena did not reconcile until, 2 or 3 years later, Lenya divorced her. Fortunately, they had no kids.

In a short while Ghena married a very nice girl – at least, that was my impression. They are still together and have an adult son, Ilusha. In 1973 Lenya decided to emigrate. Ada, Tolya and their child were already in America.

In the US Lenya endured many hardships and worked many different jobs. While working in a store, he met the owner's daughter and married her. His bride's parents organized a beautiful wedding in a restaurant. All Lenya's relatives from this side of the Atlantic were invited, including Innochka.

Lenya's father-in-law was fairly wealthy. He had a factory outside the city, and he sent Lenya and his wife to manage that factory. In the province Lenya became bored. He had no friends there and frequently traveled to New York, leaving his wife behind. A few months later they divorced, though she was already pregnant. Her father demanded that Lenya should disclaim his unborn child and never even see it. And that's how it happened, even though afterwards they were offended that no one had visited the child in the hospital. When the boy was 10, he declared that he wanted to see his father. His grandfather called Lenya and offered him to meet the boy in his presence. Thus, they met. Lenya said that the boy was blonde, plump and fond of eating well, just like himself. I think, this was the only time

they met.

Lenya has a family of 13 years. His third marriage was to Nella Oselkin whose mother and brother are dentists. She has a daughter from first marriage. She and Lenya also had a daughter – Michelle, named after Lenya's father Misha Bogorad.

It took Lenya a long time to find his place in America. He tried working as a taxi-driver, as a broker, as a worker at furniture warehouses and at stores. Finally, he took real estate courses, got a license and opened his own real estate office. I think, he is doing pretty well. May Lord give him happiness and success. He is a very nice and kind person.

Allochka has two charming granddaughters, children of her first son Garrik. He married very early, at twenty, I think, taking a beautiful young Israeli girl whose parents had arrived to Israel from Lithuania. They had a beautiful wedding in a restaurant. Many relatives and friends attended.

Garrik and Dorrit (that's his wife's name) lived very well and even opened their own store. Dorrit assisted him in the store. Then for a while they parted, but came back together again. Now everything is fine with them.

As for her second son Ilusha, he is the object of her constant worries. He is a handsome boy, slender and tall, and girls never leave him alone. He likes dressing well and his parents encourage this passion of his. Also, he is in the habit of going out at night and coming back in the morning, so that he is always late for classes. At some point Ilusha even dropped out of school – I think, it was before his last year – but he did not work. All he was interested in was having fun.

Then his parents promised to buy him a car if he finishes school and enters college. He did as they asked and got his car, but I don't think he was interested in studying. I heard that he and two of his friends, who are also not crazy about studying, went to work for stock exchange. They are very happy with their work. Well, tastes differ. Some people study and achieve high results, and others want nothing but money.

When Olia married Senya Budnevich, I considered him a nice, decent person. Now she says that he has very difficult personality and that putting up with him is not easy. Apparently, she knows him better than others do. I still think that his character changes are part of the aging process. He is very good with her children and grandchildren, and this is his great advantage. But they never interfere in their

private life.

He never had children of his own. This may be the other contributing factor. Because love for children lives within every human being.

Senya believes that he knows everything, that his judgment and his skills are superior to those of the others. Therefore, he has no respect for Olia. He is rude with her and never lets her have her way. He is fond of teasing her and because of this they always have spats and rows that leave them not on speaking terms. This lasts for months and makes family climate rather tense. And there is no way out of it. They've been together for 30 years, and divorce at their age is not conceivable.

Besides, Olia always remembers her mother's words: «A stick is still a husband». In other words – «A woman does not look good without a husband».

This may be true, but certainly not for all women, especially if they are educated and independent.

Olia and Senya have very few interests in common. Olia likes to see everything and to know everything. She enjoys theatrical performances, concerts and museums; regularly goes on tours to different places and countries. Senya is interested in nothing at all. Thus, most of the time Olia travels alone and feels sad about it.

On the other hand, Senya does a lot of good for her. Still, atmosphere in their family is very tense.



**Leningrad, Russia.**



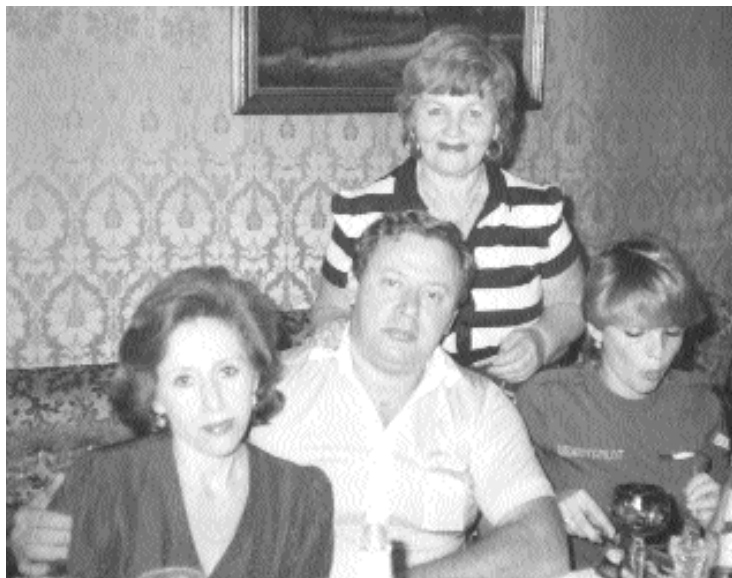
**Olga with her husband  
Semen.**



**Olga with her daughter  
Alla and son Lenya.**



**Olga with daughter Alla and niece Joyce. New York.**



**Olga with daughter Alla and son Lenya. New York.**





**Bar-mitzvah Olga's grandson Ilya. 1984, New York.**



**Olga with her brothers  
Mark, Senya, Aron and Lev.  
New York.**



**Olga's son Lenya and granddaughter Michelle.**



**Olga and her husband Semen Budnevich.**



**Olga and Sofa  
in Israel.**



**Olga with brothers: oldest Arkadiy  
and youngest Sasha. Leningrad.**