

# Molka Mirskaya

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Kishinev

Moldova

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

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*Molka Mirskaya lives in one of the greenest and most beautiful parts of the Kishinev [Chisinau in Moldovan] city center. She resides in a ten-storied building, constructed in the 1970s. Molka and her husband live in a two-room apartment with all the modern conveniences. There are a lot of books on the bookshelves and in a bookcase. The walls are adorned with reproductions and engravings. Molka Mirskaya is a pretty fair-haired voluptuous woman with big gray eyes. She is still beautiful. She meets me affably and shows me into the drawing-room, where her pictures were laid out for me. The way Molka met me and started her story testifies to her keen interest in our work and the willingness to contribute to the revival of the Bessarabian [1](#) Jewish history.*

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## My family background

I, Molka Mirskaya, nee Vaksman, come from a common family of Kishinev Jews. My paternal grandfather, Khuna Vaksman, born in Kishinev in the 1880s, finished cheder, which was traditional for poor Jewish families. He didn't continue his education. Khuna started earning his bread and butter early in his adolescence. He was an apprentice at a bakery, and subsequently became a baker himself. Khuna never had his own business. No matter how hard he tried to tuck away a nest-egg to open-up his own business, it never went beyond his reveries. My grandfather always worked for a well-heeled Jewish bread chandler, Goldman.

My grandmother, Khuna's wife Motl Vaksman – I don't know her maiden name – was several years younger than my grandfather. Her name seemed to be odd, as usually this name was given to boys. Grandmother was a housewife. As far as I remember my grandparents used to rent an apartment on Keleyevskaya Street. It was a dark and indigent apartment, consisting of two rooms. However, Grandmother took pains to embellish the apartment for it not to look so poor. There were snow-white starched doilies on the table and sideboard. The oven was always impeccably cleaned and lime washed. Grandmother, wearing almost one and the same clothes – a long black skirt and a long blouse – used to scurry around the apartment taking off the inconspicuous dust. She wore a kerchief on her head so that one could see her ears. I thought she did that in order to hear better. Only now I found pictures in the magazines of Jewish photographs showing the same way of

wearing a kerchief as my grandmother did. Grandfather also dressed the way other elderly Jews did – a long jacket suit and a black hat.

On Fridays Grandmother changed her attire. She would dress up in white instead of wearing a dark blouse. That was the way she dressed for the holidays, when she went to the synagogue with Grandfather. My grandparents were practically illiterate, though Grandmother knew how to put her signature in Yiddish. Grandfather couldn't even do that. My grandfather's family was religious, but they were no zealots. Khuna and Motl observed the kashrut, Jewish traditions, celebrated Jewish holidays and went to the synagogue. But I don't remember them praying, and they never idled on Sabbath, they used to work about the house. Of course, they brought up children according to the religious traditions, but they failed to make them truly religious.

They had two children: my father Yoel and his younger sister Rosa, born in 1908. Rosa got married early to a local Jew called Shepshel Khalfin, and bore three children in a row. But she was unhappy. Rosa's husband died from tuberculosis, leaving three orphans. Rosa, who knew how to sew a little bit, became a seamstress. But she wasn't able to keep her three children. That is why she gave the oldest son Veil to a hospice. The other two, Avrum and Ruklya, who was called Raya, stayed with their mother. They were very poor, and my father always used to give some money to his younger sister from our pretty skimpy budget.

In 1941 Rosa was evacuated with her children and wasn't in touch with us. Only after the Great Patriotic War [2](#) was over, my father found out that Rosa and Avrum were killed during the bombing of their echelon. He found his niece Ruklya in the Russian town of Ivanovo, where she lived in the orphanage and went to a weavers' school. My father took her in and she stayed with us until she got married. Rosa's elder son Veil was drafted into the Soviet Army in 1941 and was reported missing in action during the first war months. No matter how we strove we didn't manage to find out anything about him.

My father, Yoel Vaksman, was born in Kishinev in 1906. After he finished cheder he was a cobbler's apprentice, and then he became a cobbler himself. By the time of drafting into the Romanian Army he became a cobbler of the fifth grade and this was written in his military pass. I don't know who nurtured Communist ideas in my father, and when, he always used to sympathize with the Communist Party, though he himself was not a member. He also used to call upon the Soviet mode of life, taking part in the strikes, and Romanian authorities were after him. He was frequently arrested for dissemination of Communist literature. He was put in jail, beaten up, but always released. Once the craftsmen, who were on a strike, were taken away and punished by having freezing water poured all over them in the cold. After that Father got ill rather often.

My father met his future wife at the birthday party of her friend, it happened in 1928. They liked each other at once and started dating. Then they understood that they would never part. It was the time when my father was drafted into the army. They arranged an engagement to be certain that they would stay together. My father was in the army for three years, and my mother was waiting for him. When Father was on leave in Kishinev, he decided not to go back to the army. My father was so head over heels in love with mother that he couldn't part with her. He was found, arrested and returned to his military unit. They made him serve an extra year. Mother had to wait for my father for four years, and she was faithful to him.

My maternal grandfather Elek Alterman was a cobbler. He was born in Kishinev in 1870. Grandmother Charna was born in Orgeyev [Orhei in Moldovan] in the 1880s. As an adolescent girl, she was noticed by my grandfather, Elek Alterman, who came to a huge Jewish wedding in Orgeyev, being the groom's distant relative from Kishinev. He saw Grandmother and fell in love. In several weeks he proposed to my grandmother. Their wedding was truly Jewish: with a chuppah, rabbi, klezmer musicians, numerous guests and scrumptious food. Charna left for Kishinev after the wedding. The firstborn came in a year. Elek and Charna had six children. Though one of them died as an infant. I don't remember his name. All children went to cheder, and then their father gave them for apprenticeship to the craftsmen, for them to help out their parents with maintaining this big family.

The eldest was born in 1902 and given the rare Jewish name Nysl. He was also a cobbler, making uppers. He had a wife, Feiga, and two children. The elder, born in 1934, was named Ella after my grandfather Elek. And with the birth of a boy in 1937, their wealthy neighbor, the sponsor of the synagogue came. He had buried his father Hershl not long before that. Since the neighbor didn't have his own children and didn't hope to have any in the future, he offered them big money to sponsor the child under the condition that they give him the name of Hershl. I don't know if the rich man kept his word, but my cousin was named Hershl. During the Great Patriotic War Nysl was evacuated with his wife and children to the town of Guryev [today Kazakhstan], not far from Astrakhan. He died in 1987. Now Hershl with his family have a happy life in Tel Aviv. We are in touch with Ella Sharf [her marital name], who lives with her family in Kishinev.

Then my mother was born, a boy, Shloime, followed her – a fly in the ointment – as they say. So in a common family of working people, Elek and Charna, a bad egg was born, who didn't care for study nor work, he just took to the bottle, having fun and sometimes fights. Shloime wasn't married. When the Great Patriotic War broke out, he went to the front as a volunteer, and we don't know what happened to him. He could be living somewhere in Russia, or maybe he was killed in battle.

Mother's younger sister Feiga, born in 1913, became a seamstress. She didn't get married in Kishinev, besides there was nothing to do there, and she decided to leave for Bucharest. She rented an apartment there, and worked as a seamstress at a sort of factory. She married a Bucharest Jew. I don't know his name, since she was married only for a couple of months. When in 1940 the Soviet regime was installed in Bessarabia [3](#), Feiga left everything and came back to Kishinev with her husband, as she was afraid to be separated from her relatives, when Fascism flourished in Bessarabia. During evacuation Feiga and her husband were reported missing. That is all we know about them. They must have died during the bombing of their echelon like my father's sister.

The youngest in the family, Avrum, born in 1918, became a tailor. He evacuated with our family when the Great Patriotic War started and then at the beginning of the war went to the front as a volunteer. Avrum was severely wounded, and lost his arm. When he came back from the hospital, he settled in Kokand [today Uzbekistan] with me and my mother. We returned to Kishinev together. After that Avrum married a Jewish woman, Basya, and adopted three children: Charna, named after Grandmother, Tsilya and Molka. They all currently reside in Israel. Avrum's daughters have their own families. His senile wife Basya is at a hospice, and Avrum stays with each of his daughters in turns.

My mother, Tsivia Alterman, was born in Kishinev in 1906. She went to a Russian school for a couple of years, and then she learnt to become a seamstress. Grandfather Elek bought her a 'Singer' sewing machine, which my mother took great care of. She lubricated and cleaned it.

The family of Elek and Charna was more religious than my father's family. My grandfather Elek used to think that one could do without food for the entire week, but for Fridays and Saturdays there should have been a feast. He went to the synagogue on Fridays. The synagogue was located not very far from our house, at Asiatskaya Street. Grandmother laid a festive table, lit candles and the whole family got together to celebrate Sabbath.

After getting acquainted with Father in 1928, my mother waited for him for four years. My father was supposed to return from the army in January of 1932. My mother was excited to see him. Things were ready for the wedding. But there was a tribulation on the eve of my father's arrival. Grandfather Elek died and when Father arrived, he saw Mother and Grandmother Charna mourning. The wedding was put off for several weeks, then for some more time, as Grandmother Charna insisted. And when Grandmother broke the subject of shifting the date of the wedding for the third time, Father went to the rabbi for advice, and he said that the wedding couldn't be postponed for a third time. Thus, my parents went to the synagogue under a chuppah. When I was a child, I enjoyed looking at a beautiful picture of my mother in her wedding dress and my father in the frock coat. Unfortunately this picture was burned during war times. According to the Jewish rites the wedding was modest, considering Grandmother was mourning.

After the wedding my parents moved in with Grandmother Charna. I was born on 19th January 1933, in the Jewish hospital, which was free for poor Jews. I was called Molka, but I don't know whom I was named after. We lived in a small three-room apartment, rented from a Romanian, Domna. The house was one-storied, with a long veranda, with two apartments – the landlord's and ours – facing each other. During the first months after the wedding our family lived modestly, not to say poorly. There was a cutting table and my mother's sewing-machine, our bread-winner, in the first room. The second room was my parent's bedroom. My grandmother and I stayed in the third room.

## Growing up

I have memories of myself since the early age of three. My grandmother always stayed with me. My mother used to work hard. The problem was that even after getting married my father didn't stop being overwhelmed with Communist ideas. He was an instigator, and participant of the strikes, that is why he often lost jobs. There were few owners of shoe workshops and factories in Kishinev, and soon they got to know my father very well. They didn't want to employ him and would say: 'You are a good worker, but a big mouth!' Of course, Father was not a lazybones, but he never had a steady and well-paid job. My small, slender mother with strong hands and will was the bread-winner of our family. She said facetiously that Father was playing in revolution.

My mother sewed all ladies' dresses, suits and even coats, as well as children's clothes. She also mended and remade things, which was so important. Mother's clients were common Jewish women, our neighbors, the same as my mother and grandmother. My mother, coming from a cobbler's family, had an immaculate taste. Since my early childhood my mother dressed me up, and she dressed to the nines, too. When I was going outside, my mother would take a break from sewing to see how I was dressed. Sometimes she made me change my clothes, or use different

ribbons to match my dress. They said I was a cute child with gray eyes and fair hair, braided in rolls. I wore a snood over my braids to keep my hair in. I was a poor trencherman, and my grandmother was following me with a plate in the yard to feed me, asking me in Yiddish, 'What are you going to eat tomorrow?' Tomorrow, or today, I didn't want to eat anything but hominy [corn flour meal] with fried fish.

I had a wonderful childhood. My mother and grandmother loved me very much, and my dad just adored me. Every morning he used to kiss me while I was asleep and said that we would go for a walk in the evening if I ate well and behaved. I was looking forward to the evening. My father came back home, had lunch, and the three of us, dressed up – my dad in a suit, my mother in a frock, and I with the ribbons in my braids – used to go to an ice-cream café, owned by a Greek. There were tented tables in this Greek café. There were no less than 30 kinds of ice-cream, and my father bought me a new one each time. Then we walked along the thoroughfare and went to the park. Sometimes we went to the sausage store, which belonged to a Russian merchant, and bought tasty sausages, which were packaged in a parcel with a bow. I liked carrying that parcel home. However, my grandmother and I didn't eat those sausages, as she observed the kashrut. My father wasn't religious, he would even eat pork fat at work. Sometimes I used to eat a piece of tasty sausage from Father, if my grandmother Charna wasn't close by.

Apart from the Greek owner of the café and the Russian 'pork-butcher,' Jews owned most of the stores, small shops and restaurants. The Jewish population made up 80 percent of the population in Kishinev and almost all of them lived in the central part of the city. Our family kept in touch only with Jews, and it seemed to me in childhood that there were no other people. Yiddish has always been my mother tongue. My parents, grandparents, relatives and my childhood friends spoke that language. Jewish families lived in our yard, a Jewish girl named Klara and I used to play with dolls and with paper wraps. I was worried about Klara's fate after evacuation. I used to wonder where she was, and whether my blue dress, which I gave to her, had been kept. After the war there was neither Klara nor the dress. Probably her family just didn't return to Kishinev.

I was friends with a boy called Izya. He was my age. His father was an accountant, which was associated with wealth, as compared to our families of common craftsmen. Izya's mother Zhenya dressed to the nines, and usually hired a cab. Izya's family was also famous for having a refrigerator – it was an unseen luxury back in those times. It was called 'Glacier.' Aunt Zhenya treated me very well, often asked me to come and visit them. Then my mother dressed me up even more meticulously. Izya's mother gave me chocolate and the tastiest homemade cookies. She talked to me as she would to an adult, and it flattered me. When I caught scarlet fever, and my mother was with me in the quarantine, the so-called 'contagious' hospital, Aunt Zhenya and Izya came to my ward, all dressed up, and brought me oranges. It was very important for my mother. Years passed, and my mother still remembered about those oranges. Izya and his parents were reported missing during the Great Patriotic War.

There were no more friends but Klara, Izya and my cousin Ella, often brought by my Aunt Feiga. My grandmother was my greatest friend and confidante. She was always neat, in a snow-white kerchief. She used to have her hands full about the house – dusting, cleaning, washing and ironing and at the same time she was teaching me, perceiving my childish curiosity and worries. She scrubbed the apartment before Sabbath, even washed the walls. There were starched napkins on

the table and on the chairs, old and darned, but clean. Grandmother lit candles, and there was freshly baked challah and wine on the table. My father was present, too. In spite of him not being religious, he respected Jewish traditions, and he let Mother and Grandmother observe them. On Saturday he usually went out, either to see relatives or acquaintances.

Jewish holidays were always celebrated in our family. There was a chest in the bedroom covered with a rug, containing paschal dishes. I was looking forward to Pesach, for the beautiful dishes to be removed from the chest along with the crockery and goblets, even my special little blue cup. When Grandmother kneeled by the chest, trying to unlock it, I asked to take out my blue cup in the first place. Before Pesach Mother even stopped working and helped Grandmother clean the apartment. Just before the holiday, matzah was brought from the synagogue. I don't remember the rite of ousting chametz from the house, but I remember that there was no bread in the house during this holiday. During seder there was the most scrumptious Jewish food cooked by my grandmother: chicken stew, gefilte fish, casseroles, matzah dishes. My father didn't observe seder the proper way. All of us just sat at the table, prayed and started eating. Sometimes my grandmother took me to Uncle Nysl for other seders. He was religious, and carried out seder sticking to the Haggadah. We went to Uncle Nysl during Chanukkah, too. I was given Chanukkah gelt. Grandmother made delicious potato scones and doughnuts with jam.

Since my early childhood I remember Yom Kippur. I was astounded that my mother and grandmother were fasting. I recall how my mother took me to see my grandfather Khuna and grandmother Motl, for them to chat to me and get distracted from hunger. I didn't know the reason for their fasting. During the Doomsday holiday my mother and grandmother went to the synagogue. I remember that they left me with the neighbor. I wanted her to take me there, and my mother said that during that day a special prayer was read, and those whose parents were alive were not supposed to listen to it. My mother promised to take me to the synagogue for other more festive occasions. She kept her word and took me there for Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Chanukkah and Pesach. There was a small one-storied synagogue not very far away from our house. But it seemed very beautiful to me. It was the place where the Fascists shot Jews later, during the occupation. The building of the synagogue was burned during the Great Patriotic War.

During Sukkot holidays they built a sukkah in the neighboring yard. My family had dinner with my neighbors over there. I was cold, and I even remembered a Russian saying: 'As cold as in a sukkah, but I didn't know that I had to dress warm for the sukkah; however, I liked it anyway. I liked the merry holiday of Purim, and especially how we got ready for it. My mother and grandmother would bake hamantashen with poppy, honey and nuts, fluden, waffles with honey and nuts, which were put in packages. In the morning, a mentally retarded lad came from the synagogue, running an errand. He took shelakhmones and gave it to relatives and acquaintances. Later on, there were presents from them. Later on my mother and grandmother used to discuss Aunt Feiga's hamantashen, which were better than Aunt Basya's. When I grew up a little bit, my mother took me to purimshpiels in the Jewish lyceum.

There were female and male lyceums in Kishinev, as well as a Jewish hospital, health care community, orphanages and hospices for the children from poor families, almshouse, charity canteens, in a nutshell: a great network of ordinary and charitable institutions. Zionist ideas were very popular at that time [4](#), i.e. the idea to create the Jewish state. Zionists had their organizations, viz. professional schools and sports organizations – Maccabi World Union [5](#). I was not of age to be



enrolled there, but I learnt from my parents that those organizations existed.

At the end of the 1930s, inter-community relations deteriorated with the foundation of the Fascist party of the Cuzists [6](#) and legionaries [7](#). They used racism and anti-Semitism in their rhetoric, but there were no open collisions and pogroms as there were in Germany. There were cases of moral anti-Semitism, and my mother had to go through that. There was one tram line in Kishinev along the lengthy Armyanskaya Street to the city cemetery. My mother was in the tram car, fashionably dressed in a coat, wearing a hat and gloves. There was a Romanian officer sitting close to her. An ill-kept and poorly dressed elderly Jew got on the tram at one of the stops. He took a seat next to the officer. Then the officer started demanding that the Jew should get up and leave. The old man didn't get to say a word. Then my mother sat down between the officer and the old man. The officer took off his gloves, hit the old man with them and turned him out of the tram, telling my mother that the old man smelled. Who knows how the officer would have acted if he had found out that my mother was a Jew.

In 1939 mother gave birth to a son. My brother was named Shepshel after my Aunt Rosa's husband. In June 1940 I joined a professional girls' school, Tarbut [8](#). I was trained for a certain time, along with getting compulsory education. But I wasn't able to study there. On June 28th 1940 the Soviet Army entered Bessarabia and the Soviet regime was established. My father was rejoicing. He put on a dressy suit and went out to the central street, where Soviet tanks were placed, with the soldiers communicating with people. He came back very happy, showing Mother a simple huge Soviet watch that he swapped with the Soviet soldier for an expensive Swiss watch given to him by Grandfather Khuna. When Mother dared to tell Father that the swap wasn't fair and equal, he said that the most important thing was that the watch was Soviet. Then he went to the photo shop straight away to get a picture taken with his new watch.

Our Romanian landlord Domna escaped to Romania the same night, taking only precious things with her. Her well-furnished apartment was given to two Soviet officers and their wives. They became our neighbors. These officers' wives, who had never seen beautiful clothes and lingerie in Russia, put on laced chemises of the Romanian lady, and wanted to go out in them, mistaking the underwear for evening gowns. They didn't care and were walking in these chemises along the street. The officers and their wives were running amok with such an exuberance of grapes, wine, delicious products and fruit, sold dirt cheap by the peasants. They had never seen anything like that. Hardly had three days passed, everything vanished from the stores: caviar, tasty fish, smoked meat, cheese. Even bread became rare. Then repressions started. Many of those, who were connected with Zionist movements, as well as the remaining rich and well-off people were arrested and exiled. We were lucky to be beyond that. The Soviet authorities took no interest in us. My father was disillusioned. The Soviet regime didn't meet his expectations. He even said in despair that they were not so-called brothers, but cousins.

## During the war

In September 1940 I was supposed to go to a Russian school. But I caught measles, missed the beginning of the school year, and my mother decided that I should go to school the next year. My happy and carefree childhood lasted for another year: Father still went for a walk with us in the evenings – my parents paid a lot of attention to me, teaching me to read and count. I knew the Russian and Yiddish alphabet. And on 22nd June 1941 the Great Patriotic War broke out. My father

was demobilized in several days. I remember seeing him off. Father kissed me saying that the war wouldn't last long. The Red Army was very strong and would defeat the Fascists, so he would be back home in a couple of weeks. He was not the only one to believe that. Many people didn't even think of evacuation. Grandfather Khuna said that he had lived with Russians, Romanians, and Communists and will be able to live with the Germans. He was flatly against evacuation. My grandparents stayed in Kishinev.

Kishinev was bombed real hard. Mother and Grandmother decided to leave. We left for the neighboring village on foot, holding my little brother in our arms. My parents had some Moldovan acquaintances there. We stayed there for two or three days, as the host told us that the Fascists had retreated and we could go home. Kishinev was on fire, before the Red Army retreated. Mother could hardly pack some things. My mother and grandmother left the city, holding me and Shepshel tight. I remember things burning and collapsing. It was hideous. My mother covered my eyes with her hand so I wouldn't get scared. We met Uncle Avrum and Aunt Feiga on our way.

We were walking for several weeks. The bombing gradually weakened. It was hard to walk as it was stifling in the daytime, and cool at night. We were also caught in the rain a number of times. Mother went to some Ukrainian village to get a rest and get dry. A beautiful Ukrainian woman was very hospitable. She brought us some warm water and gave us food. It was so good and warm that we decided to stay. Then in a couple of days the scared neighbor rushed in and said, 'Tsivia, leave. The Germans are ten kilometers away from the village!' So we ran again. We walked on a road full of fugitives. Sometimes people were sorry for us and put us in a cart, then we went by a truck. Then we went by train a little bit. Mother washed at the railway stations using process hot water, coming from steam trains. We had nothing to eat, we just picked up ears of wheat roots, boiled maize, we ate seeds.

This way we reached Rostov-upon-Don. I was eight years old, and all those things are mixed up in my memory. I remember that we stayed in Rostov for some time and then in a Cossack village near Rostov. This is how we spent the first war winter, but I can't recall everything clearly now. When the Fascists approached Rostov, we moved on. We reached Stalingrad [now Volgograd in Russia, 1200 km north-east of Kishinev], and came to the evacuation point. We stayed there no longer than a day, were given some sort of soup and dispatched to the railway station. The city was on fire and the fugitives were sent away immediately.

I remember how a soldier lifted me up and put me in the car, he did the same with my brother. They put us in the locomotive. After that my brother got ill and I had an outbreak of furunculosis. When we arrived in Astrakhan [today Russia], we were put in hospital, my brother was in the infectious department as he had measles, complicated by a cold, and I was in the surgery department. My brother died in the hospital. And I learned about it when I was discharged from the hospital. I don't remember how we went across the Volga, and moved forward. We were brought to Tashkent [today Uzbekistan, 3500 km east of Kishinev], and from there we went to a collective farm [9](#) near Kokand [today Uzbekistan].

The evacuated were lodged in a club. There was nothing to sleep on, so my grandmother, mother and Feiga picked up grass, dried it and put it on the floor. In several days collective farmers brought some simple trestle beds that we used. We starved, the food provided by the collective farm was not enough. Other Jewish families were our neighbors. There was one family from



Kharkov [today Ukraine], another family was from Poland. I went out with other children, looking for food in the collective farm. We managed to find apricots, carrots and beets. Uzbeks let us pick things up from the ground, without taking anything from the tree. Uncle Avrum walked to the military enlistment office, located in Kokand, to go to war and not to starve. My mother and Feiga worked in the collective farm, picking cotton. It was cold. The evacuees used an oven from the club for heating purposes. We filled it with cotton waste and started the fire with coal taken from Uzbeks, as we had no matches.

I remember how in 1942 Grandmother was asking me at night, 'Feigele, I would like to have some tea to get warm. Take the coal and make me tea, I am so cold!' My reply was that I was afraid to walk around at night and I asked Granny to wait until the morning. When I woke up, Granny still hadn't got up. When Mother and Feiga came back from work I told them that Grandmother was still asleep. She died at night, and I being next to her, didn't even notice it. Mother and Feiga buried Grandmother behind the cemetery fence. Uzbek Muslims didn't let Grandmother be buried in their cemetery. Then Feiga left. She was told that her husband had been seen in some city, and she left there to look for him. She left and went missing. I never saw her again, and know nothing about her. She must have died in 1941, otherwise, she would have definitely come back to us or sent us a letter, but I don't know how she perished.

My mother and I remained by ourselves. There was no news about my father and uncle Avrum, and our hope was forlorn to see them ever again. We had a hard life in the collective farm. Mother decided to move to the city. One early morning we packed our few things and walked away. It took us a day to reach Kokand. My mother asked for help in broken Russian. The policeman that we came across first took us to the railway station. That was the place where we could stay overnight. We went to the evacuation point in the morning. We were given food and taken to an apartment. The Uzbek owner of the apartment made our beds in the corridor between two rooms. We had to go to bed after everybody had fallen asleep, otherwise there was no way they could open the door. But it was a wonderful and warm lodging as compared to the collective farm. Mother went to work for the military plant, where valenki [warm Russian felt boots] were made for the front. She worked for two-three shifts without a break for me to survive and not die of hunger.

After a while we received a letter from my father. He found us through a notice he saw in Buguruslan. My mother and I cried from happiness. My father wrote that he didn't go to the front; he was mobilized to do physical work for the army [10](#). He worked at the military plant in Ulyanovsk. He enclosed his picture in the letter – unfortunately, my mother didn't keep the picture, she tore it up and threw it away after war. Father asked us to write and send him our pictures. We went to the central photo shop to have our picture taken. Both of us were unrecognizable, having swollen bellies from starvation and I, having a bald head. Those pictures were sent to my father together with the letter, where Mother wrote about our ordeals and losses – my brother's and grandmother's deaths. Father told us after the war that he couldn't believe his eyes, when he was looking at our pictures, and his friends were laughing at him and telling him that he had lied to them when he said that his wife and daughter were beautiful. They also said that my mother was illegitimately pregnant. Certainly, my father didn't believe the gossip. He used to write to us and even sent a package with provisions, containing sugar, rusks, canned meat. It was a real joy and treat. We exchanged canned meat for four loaves of bread.

I turned nine, and still hadn't started school. I was ashamed of my illiteracy in front of my coevals. Our neighbor, a Jew from Kharkov, taught me the letters. I started writing. Then I went to school without feeling ashamed. I was accepted in the third grade. However, my name was changed. When my mother began to process my documents – my birthday certificate had been lost – she was told that the name of Molka didn't exist and they suggested naming me Maya. There were many other problems, and my mother agreed to it even without arguing. At the end of the day it wasn't important what was written in my documents. I became Maya then.

My life was getting better. I remember how we were exulting when we heard the news about the liberation of Bessarabia and Kishinev. We understood that the victory was coming, and soon we would be able to return. At the end of 1944 I caught dysentery. I wasn't fed at the hospital, they decided not to waste precious food on such patients and I was on the brink of death. Uncle Avrum showed up in my ward like an apparition. It turned out that he was decommissioned for being wounded and sent to the hospital in Tashkent. Here he found my mother and me via an enquiry bureau. One of his arms was an amputation stump. He took me with his only hand as I was so feather-light and took me home. I was fed at home. Uncle brought food, and I was getting better. Avrum sold on rustic tobacco and rented a better room for us. Soon he was called to Kishinev. He had the right to come back there as he was at war, and he registered us as his family members. In April 1945 we went home. Of course, our way back home was much shorter as we took the train as passengers with tickets.

I couldn't recognize my native city. It was devastated. The central part was in shambles. Our pre-war apartment was also destroyed. A Moldovan lady leased a small room to us, where the three of us stayed before my father's arrival. During the first months after our arrival my mother and I went to the place, where my grandparents Khuna and Motl used to live before the war. Their Moldovan neighbors told us a terrible story about how they perished. After the Fascists occupied the city, they brought all Jews together out of town. They also came for my grandparents. Grandfather, being seriously sick, couldn't walk and fell in the yard and Grandmother bent over him. Then a Fascist shot them at once. They died immediately without much agony. The neighbor said that they didn't want to remove the corpses, and they stayed in the yard for a long time as a warning for those who wanted to help or hide Jews. When the bodies were taken away, the blood stains couldn't be washed for a long time, and were removed later with snow. My mother couldn't listen to the details of her parents' death. So she left rapidly and never came back to that place again.

I remember how we rejoiced during the victory day in May 1945, one month after our arrival. Uncle Avrum went back to work, and my mother found clients and took up sewing again. Father wrote to us and even sent us money from Ulyanovsk. In fall I went to school, to the fifth grade. My life was getting much better. In the summer of 1946 Father came back, which made me really happy. We didn't want to leave him for a minute. The three of us laughed and cried, clustered together. Father couldn't get over my brother's and his parents' death for a long time. Uncle Nysl came back from evacuation with his family. He also became disabled. His leg was amputated after he was afflicted with diabetes. Father and my legless uncle found a small deserted house and began fixing it. They looked for old construction materials, ransacked the shambles and finally were able to fix two little rooms in the house. One of those rooms was taken by Nysl's family, and the other by my family and Uncle Avrum.

## After the war

Soon, our family got bigger. My mother got pregnant, and my parents decided that it was a godsend. They thought if this were a boy, they would stop mourning over Shepshel. But in 1948 a girl was born. They named her Musya. My parents and I loved her very much. In 1947 Father found his niece Raya [Ruklya], the daughter of his perished sister Rosa. He went to Ivanovo and took her from the orphanage. Raya settled in with us. So, there were six of us sharing one room. My parents and little Musya slept on a big bed bought at the market. Raya and I shared a trestle bed. Avrum slept on the floor. Soon Avrum got married and went to live with his wife. Raya, who was my close friend, got married at the age of 17 and left our house. She was always a dear friend to me, and a sister to my mother. Rayechka had a wonderful life with her husband. They had two sons. Unfortunately she died young from cancer. Her sons with their families moved to Israel in the late 1970s. I don't keep in touch with Raya's sons.

Father worked at a shoe factory as a shoemaker. He was well-respected and became a foreman. My mother spent the whole day sewing as she did before the war. I helped her about the house, looking after my little sister. I finished seven grades of school. I was a good student. I was keen on literature and was an avid reader. I went to the library every other day. They didn't exchange books earlier than that. I was glued to books and 'gulped them up.' I read while walking, in a tram. They knew me and loved me in the library. My parents advised me to find a job after I had finished seven grades, as it was hard for them to keep me and my little sister. I talked about it in the library. The head of the library offered me a job there. First I was taught how to distribute books on shelves, hand out books, work with catalogues and soon I became a competent librarian. I finished evening school while I was working. The head of the library recommended me to enter a librarians' school, located in the town of Soroki [Soroca in Moldovan], not far from Kishinev. I passed the entrance exams successfully and I was enrolled for the second year of the extramural department. I worked in my library, and still read books in bouts. I took exams twice a year. After obtaining a diploma, I was appointed the senior librarian.

I had many friends, but I was particularly close with Ella, my cousin. I remember how we were getting over Stalin's death in the year of 1953. When his death was announced, thousands of Kishinev people rushed to his monument, depicting Stalin in a military coat with the stretched out hand, which was located by the Patria cinema on the central city square. There was a long line of people, who'd been waiting there for hours to bring flowers to the monument. We were also in the line, sobbing. There was mourning in our library. When at the 20th Communist Party Congress [11](#) Khrushchev [12](#) dispelled the myths behind Stalin's personality cult, it was another blow, as our idol was crushed. We had worked for many hours in the library. We had to look through every book. If we came across the mention of Stalin's name or his picture, we were supposed to mar those books by crossing out his name and tearing out his picture.

I kept in touch with my school friend Lusya Baum. She studied at the railway school, and invited me for a New Year's party in 1957. There were a lot of boys in her company. There were few girls in that school. My mother made a new dress for me to celebrate the New Year. As always, she chose the fabric and the style. I asked her to make a detachable dress that was in fashion. But she didn't listen. She sewed the way she found appropriate, being frugal and taking into account the eternal need of the Jews to remake and reuse things. And now she remade a dress by adding beautiful frilling at the bottom, making me the best-dressed girl there. It was 'bring your own party,' so everybody had to take a dish. My mother made potato patties, which everybody enjoyed. That was

a Jewish company, and there I met a lad whom I liked. In spite of the fact that my boyfriend was in the army at the time, we started seeing each other. I had to listen to my mother's stories about my mother's and father's love for each other, about how my mother waited for my dad for four years. They disapproved of my precipitancy, but my heart could not be forced.

My beloved, a Jewish guy called Aron Mirskiy, was born in Bucharest in 1932. His father Uscher was a locomotive mechanic and his mother Perl was a housewife. Aron was an only child. In 1940 his family moved to Kishinev like many other Jews. Uscher went to the front from here and perished during the Great Patriotic War. His single younger brother, who survived the war, married Perl when he got back. When I met Aron he was a student of the Lvov Polytechnic Institute. We got married after he graduated from university in 1957. Our marriage was registered on 24th December, and our modest wedding was held on the 31st. The celebration took place at home with rather modest food and with gramophone music. At that time Jewish traditions weren't observed in our families, so nobody even mentioned the possibility of having a Jewish wedding. We moved to the house of Aron's mother and his stepfather. Their house was built in the suburbs of Kishinev after the war.

In 1958 our son was born and we named him Alexander. I was a young mother and kept working, but my husband insisted that I should enter the institute. I went to Moscow to enter a Bibliographic Institute. I passed the entry exams and studied extramurally for three years. In 1963 I got very ill. I had a dreadful diagnosis – cancer. The doctor told me that I had only five years to live. I quit the institute, I couldn't even think of studying. Then it turned out that they were mistaken with the diagnosis, I had no cancer. I don't even want to recall that terrible year, thinking that I was lethally ill. My parents and husband helped me get over it. My colleagues, who treated me very well, were also very supportive at that time.

In 1970 we received a good apartment, where we are currently residing. We never came across anti-Semitism. I was promoted at work. After my husband graduated from university, he was offered a leading position in the Ministry of Automobile Transport. We were pretty well-off. We owned a car, though we didn't have a country house. In the summer time we went to a wonderful facility of the Ministry of Automobile Transport for rest and recreation. Sometimes we went to the seaside. There was a pioneer [13](#) camp where Alexander spent the whole summer.

My son experienced explicit anti-Semitism, when he served in the Soviet Army in Odessa [14](#). My husband and I visited him rather often as Odessa was close by. Once I came to see my son in the summer. He was given a leave pass and went to the beach. My son didn't want to undress, and I made him do that. Then I saw bruises all over his body. I took pains to make my son tell me the truth. It turned out that he stood up for a Jewish boy, who was circumcised during childhood. Other soldiers teased him. Then anti-Semites went after my son, beating him black and blue. No matter how Alexander asked me not to leak a word of it, I went to the commander and told him everything. He promised to punish the offenders, but when I came back, nothing had changed. Then I wrote to the Ministry of Defense in Moscow. After that my son was transferred to another unit by Kherson, but the bullies weren't even punished. My son entered the automobile vocational school and then started teaching driving in the training facility. There he met a wonderful Jewish girl. Her name was Tuba Nerdinskaya. They got married and they had two children in a row: Mikhail, born in 1985, and Irina, born in 1986.

In 1985 my father passed away without having a chance to rejoice in a great-grandchild. In 1994 my mother died. She had been afflicted with cancer for a while. When my mother got ill in 1990 I had to quit work to look after her. My husband and I didn't observe religious traditions during the Soviet times. However, we went to my parents for Pesach. My mother always had matzah. My mother used to light candles on Fridays, and fasted during Yom Kippur. My parents always spoke Yiddish, so I know my mother tongue very well. I buried my parents at the Jewish cemetery according to the Jewish rite. An old Jew read a prayer.

I always wanted to be close to my kin. I knew that my true name was Molka. When in 1991 Moldova got its independence, and there was a passport exchange, I was given a certificate in an archive and changed my name from Maya to Molka. Now I am Molka again, both in my passport and in my other documents. I like my name Molka more than Maya, because it is connected to my people, my childhood and my parents.

I always took an interest in the fate of our people, Israel. During those years when Israel was spoken about as a hostile country, I got in touch with dissidents and read literature about Israel. I worshiped this country, and dreamt that one day we would live there. My husband was always against immigration. He loved Moldova and Kishinev, so I had to submit. However, my son's family immigrated to Israel in the early 1990s. I often go there. My son works in the field he is specialized in. His wife has also settled in.

Our grandson Mikhail serves in the Israeli fleet. When he was about to be drafted I told him to come to Ukraine to escape army service. Then my son had a talk with me and said that in Israel army service was honorable, and he was happy that Mikhail would serve Israel. He believed Israel needed them, and that was the reason for their immigration. My son is a real Israeli patriot. My granddaughter Irina entered the university this year. My sister Musya also lives in Israel. She didn't go on with her higher education after finishing school. She got married, and then divorced. Her second marriage with a Moldovan Jew, Shunya Weinstein, turned out to be very happy. Musya and Shunya left Israel at the end of the 1970s. Musya has a daughter, Lilia, who works as a teacher.

Now we live in independent Moldova. Many people took the breakup of the Soviet Union very negatively. But I think there is something positive in it. After gaining independence, we have the conditions to develop our Jewish culture. We have Hesed [13](#), the association of the Jewish organizations, which unites all Jewish organizations. I also found my purpose there, working as a health visitor and a kindergartner. I liked my job. My deteriorating health made me leave it. Now I am a Hesed client. My husband still works. He is the head of the automobile department in a Polyclinic. We often attend Hesed's events, celebrate holidays with our Jewish friends. Symbolic as it may be, after gaining independence and getting my original name back, I turned to the Jewish life and remembered my roots.

## Glossary:

### **1 Bessarabia**

Historical area between the Prut and Dniestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an

independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldova.

## **2 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

## **3 Annexation of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union**

At the end of June 1940 the Soviet Union demanded Romania to withdraw its troops from Bessarabia and to abandon the territory. Romania withdrew its troops and administration in the same month and between 28th June and 3rd July, the Soviets occupied the region. At the same time Romania was obliged to give up Northern Transylvania to Hungary and Southern-Dobrudja to Bulgaria. These territorial losses influenced Romanian politics during World War II to a great extent.

## **4 Revisionist Zionism**

The movement founded in 1925 and led by Vladimir Jabotinsky advocated the revision of the principles of Political Zionism developed by Theodor Herzl, the father of Zionism. The main goals of the Revisionists was to put pressure on Great Britain for a Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River, a Jewish majority in Palestine, the reestablishment of the Jewish regiments, and military training for the youth. The Revisionist Zionists formed the core of what became the Herut (Freedom) Party after the Israeli independence. This party subsequently became the central component of the Likud Party, the largest right-wing Israeli party since the 1970s.

## **5 Maccabi World Union**

International Jewish sports organization whose origins go back to the end of the 19th century. A growing number of young Eastern European Jews involved in Zionism felt that one essential prerequisite of the establishment of a national home in Palestine was the improvement of the physical condition and training of ghetto youth. In order to achieve this, gymnastics clubs were founded in many Eastern and Central European countries, which later came to be called Maccabi. The movement soon spread to more countries in Europe and to Palestine. The World Maccabi Union was formed in 1921. In less than two decades its membership was estimated at 200,000 with branches located in most countries of Europe and in Palestine, Australia, South America, South Africa, etc.



## **6 Cuzist**

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. In 1919 Cuza founded the LANC, which became the National Christian Party in 1935 with an anti-Semitic program.

## **7 Legion of the Archangel Michael (also known as the Legionary Movement)**

Movement founded in 1927 by C. Z. Codreanu. This extremist, nationalist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic movement aimed at excluding those whose views on political and racial matters were different from theirs. The Legion was organized in so-called nests, and it practiced mystical rituals, which were regarded as the way to a national spiritual regeneration by the members of the movement. These rituals were based on Romanian folklore and historical traditions. The Legionaries founded the Iron Guard as a terror organization, which carried out terrorist activities and political murders. The political twin of the Legionary Movement was the Totul pentru Tara (Everything for the Fatherland) that represented the movement in parliamentary elections. The followers of the Legionary Movement were recruited from young intellectuals, students, Orthodox clericals, peasants. The movement was banned by King Carol II in 1938.

## **8 Tarbut schools**

Elementary, secondary and technical schools maintained by the Hebrew educational and cultural organization called Tarbut. Most Eastern European countries had such schools between the two world wars but there were especially many in Poland. The language of instruction was Hebrew and the education was Zionist oriented.

## **9 Collective farm (in Russian kolkhoz)**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4 percent of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

## **10 Labor army**

it was made up of men of call-up age not trusted to carry firearms by the Soviet authorities. Such people were those living on the territories annexed by the USSR in 1940 (Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, parts of Karelia, Bessarabia and northern Bukovina) as well as ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union proper. The labor army was employed for carrying out tough work, in the woods or in mines. During the first winter of the war, 30 percent of those drafted into the labor army died of starvation and hard work. The number of people in the labor army decreased sharply when the larger part of its contingent was transferred to the national Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Corps, created at the beginning of 1942. The remaining labor detachments were maintained up until the end of the war.

## **11 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

## **12 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

## **13 All-Union pioneer organization**

a communist organization for teenagers between 10 and 15 years old (cf: boy-/ girlscouts in the US). The organization aimed at educating the young generation in accordance with the communist ideals, preparing pioneers to become members of the Komsomol and later the Communist Party. In the Soviet Union, all teenagers were pioneers.

## **14 Odessa**

The Jewish community of Odessa was the second biggest Jewish community in Russia. According to the census of 1897 there were 138,935 Jews in Odessa, which was 34,41 percent of the local population. There were seven big synagogues and 49 prayer houses in Odessa. There were heders in 19 prayer houses.

## **15 Hesed**

Meaning care and mercy in Hebrew, Hesed stands for the charity organization founded by Amos Avgar in the early 20th century. Supported by Claims Conference and Joint Hesed helps for Jews in need to have a decent life despite hard economic conditions and encourages development of their self-identity. Hesed provides a number of services aimed at supporting the needs of all, and particularly elderly members of the society. The major social services include: work in the center facilities (information, advertisement of the center activities, foreign ties and free lease of medical equipment); services at homes (care and help at home, food products delivery, delivery of hot meals, minor repairs); work in the community (clubs, meals together, day-time polyclinic, medical and legal consultations); service for volunteers (training programs). The Hesed centers have inspired a real revolution in the Jewish life in the FSU countries. People have seen and sensed the rebirth of the Jewish traditions of humanism. Currently over eighty Hesed centers exist in the FSU countries. Their activities cover the Jewish population of over eight hundred settlements.