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The Past is Still With Me: Memoir of a Soviet Yiddish Actress

Rosa Kurtz-Dranov

Foreward

Contributed by Alexander Dranov

My mother Rosa Abramovna Kurtz-Dranov passed away in New Jersey in June 2003 after a long illness. She was 94. After the burial, I sat shiva, as is Jewish custom, for the first time in my life. (I did not sit for seven days, as required). As I was going through my mother's papers — photos, letters, books, newspaper clippings — I stumbled upon a manuscript. That was her memoir, hand-written by her in New Jersey in 1987. It was an unexpected find; I had not known she was writing her memoirs.

My wife and I read them out loud for two days in a row. We could not stop. The memoir revealed my mom's life, in all its sad reality, full of tragedies, grief and infrequent joys. And with it, the life in the country where we were born and lived before emigration.

The manuscript shook me. For a long time, I could not make up my mind whether to publish it. The memories were so personal and private, clearly not intended for a wide audience. They were not written for strangers. "But can I be wrong?" I asked myself. "Maybe, even though posthumously, this mercilessly candid story about the life of a Yiddish actress, written by herself late in life, can be of interest to other people, even strangers? Despite the fact that apart from some light-hearted moments, the story contained many bitter memories about the Yiddish theater in Russia and about my own father, although my mom devoted her whole life to both of them, without reservation, without holding anything back. Can these memoirs cast a shadow on her blessed memory too?"

An unbiased Russian editor, Ludmila Shakova, reviewed the memoir and finally persuaded me to edit if not publish it, providing an Afterword which would continue my mom's story ending as it does in 1956, with my father's death. I am grateful to that lady and her professionalism. I am also grateful to everyone who read the manuscript and shared their thoughts with me, including a wonderful editor, Valeria Popova, and two people who knew and loved my mother — Elsha Belenky, now deceased, and Mark Zilberquit. In short, I made up my mind to type this edited memoir, practically uncensored.

But translate it into English? That was even a more dubious task. I thought I would never get around to that. After fifteen years I finally decided to do that too — at the request of my daughter, born here in the U.S, whose Russian is not as good as her English. Thus I dedicate this manuscript to Julia.

My mom lived a long life. In 1928, at age 20, already an experienced Yiddish actress, she enrolled in an actors' studio that was part of the newly established State Yiddish Theater in Moscow under Solomon Mikhoels (GOSET) and worked in that theater up to its closing in 1950. Twelve years later, along with a few surviving actors of the GOSET, she was accepted in the Moscow Yiddish Ensemble, created in 1962 under Khrushchev. With that ensemble she toured the Soviet Union until 1978 when we emigrated to the USA and settled in Houston, Texas. Here in Texas, she performed excerpts and songs from various Yiddish plays staged by the GOSET and then continued to do so in Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York City — everywhere our destiny found us. She last performed on the stage at age 85.

The daughter of Yiddish actors Abram and Balbina Kurtz, born in Warsaw when Poland was part of Russia, my mom began to perform on the stage when still a child. Yiddish troupes in those bygone days, as you know, did not have their own permanent premises. Those were touring theaters and their actors, “wandering stars” as Sholom Aleichem called them, who travelled to the villages and shtetls of Western Russia. They rented “corners” in private houses and rooms in cheap inns and performed in stationary theaters and circuses, usually Russian, wherever they could find a suitable space.

My mom told me that in Tsarist Russia, as in Soviet Russia, I should add, Yiddish troupes were subject to persecution and discrimination; they were not allowed to perform in Yiddish in many towns and villages. Strange as it is, they were allowed, before the World War, to perform in German. Yiddish actors tried to dodge the ban on Yiddish, switching to similar-sounding German as soon as a policeman showed up.

1928-48 is a twenty-year period when Yiddish theater thrived. In those years, there were several state Yiddish theaters in the Soviet Union, including in Minsk, Kiev, Kharkov and Odessa. The State Yiddish Theater in Moscow was the leading one, headed by prominent actor and director Solomon Mikhoels.

As is well-known, soon after Germany attacked the USSR, in August 1941 a Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) was established, with Mikhoels elected as its chairman. In 1943, together with the poet Feffer and other cultural figures, he toured the USA, Canada and Mexico with a view to raising funds to support the USSR in its fight with Germany. While the war was going on, Stalin found the JAC's activities useful, but after the defeat of Hitler's Germany, the JAC's growing prestige began to interfere with the Leader's plans.

In 1948, Mikhoels was killed in Minsk in an “auto accident” staged by security services. After Mikhoels was removed, the authorities began arresting prominent Jewish cultural figures, actors, poets, musicians, writers, such as Benjamin Zuskin, Peretz Markish, Itzik Feffer, etc. All of them were shot in August 1952. The Moscow

GOSET closed its doors in the summer of 1950. The remaining Yiddish theaters followed suit. The only survivor of those purges was a Yiddish magazine, ironically called *Sovietish Heimland*, or Soviet Motherland. The “final solution,” Soviet style, was achieved. It seemed that Yiddish culture was eradicated for good.

Dark times befell the surviving Yiddish actors. All of them found themselves out of work and with no means of support. Only one actress of the Moscow GOSET, Etel Kovenskaya, managed to get a job in the Russian theater; it was the Moscow Pushkin Theater. The others, including my mother, barely scraped a living from hand to mouth.

I remember my mother pasting together endless packs of envelopes at the end of the 1950s for some outfit or another and then making artificial flowers for the All-Russian Theater Society (VTO). Bouquets of these flowers filled our apartment; one might say, I spent my childhood in the flower garden.

That was followed by events I will briefly recount in the Afterword.

The Past Is Still With Me: Rosa Kurtz-Dranov’s Memoir

I am not sure if I can put my thoughts down on paper, tell about my life well enough, for my language seems poor and I may be unable to express all I have lived through, all that has left deep scars in my heart.

I was six years old, and my sister Aniuta was three and a half, when World War I broke out and my father, a talented 22-year-old actor, was drafted and sent to the front. We lost a devoted father and friend, a partner in our children’s games. From then on, all the burdens of our daily life lay on the shoulders of our beautiful mother, also a very good actress. It should be said that despite all the troubles and tribulations that fell crushing down on her, she always said that “everything will be all right!” Optimism and cheerfulness never abandoned her. She was loved by all for her kindness, her merry disposition and her talent. She was young and courageously endured all adversities that befell her.

My mom had a good position in the theater but without a regular salary. In those days, Yiddish actors were paid in “marks,” that is, their pay depended on the role and troupe receipts; they had to design and make their own costumes, to say nothing about the fact that constantly moving from place to place, they had to live in strangers’ houses or in furnished rooms.

Mother wanted a more secure future. So, she quit that theater and joined Fishzon’s repertory company where his son, Misha Fishzon, a famous Yiddish actor in those days, was the leading man.

It was one of the more prestigious theater companies, and my mother received a guaranteed salary there as a chorus girl. That made it possible for her to make ends meet and even send a small parcel to the front from time to time. That company had famous actors in its troupe and its own orchestra, support staff, costumes, and stage props. The company even traveled in its own railway cars.

I recall how once, during the old Fishzon's benefit performance, my sister Aniuta (already a gifted little actress admired by everyone for her mimicking adult actors) and I distinguished ourselves along with a few other children actors and received two chocolate candy boxes — a blue one for Aniuta and a pink one for me. Mother allowed us to take one candy each, sending the rest to my father at the front. We were left with empty velvet boxes as a keepsake and were utterly happy.

One fantastic occasion stayed in my memory for life. As usual, we were on tour, riding in one of Fishzon's railway cars. There were only actors in that car, among them many famous ones such as Misha Fishzon, Zaslavskaya, Dranov, Lebedev and many others. Musicians, dressers and support staff were in the other car.

I think I was a little more than seven years old already. I am lying on the upper berth. I can't fall asleep because in the next compartment I see a picture beautiful as a fairy tale! On the berth there lies an extraordinarily good-looking curly-headed boy, and a little blond-headed girl sitting next to him in an airy gown is singing him a melody, covering him with a transparent scarf from time to time!

It seems like a dream and I am afraid to close my eyes lest it suddenly disappear. I picture myself in place of that girl. I dream that when I grow up, I will meet that boy and we will fall in love.

Later, as I was growing up and often recalling that episode, I told myself: "Perhaps he will not like me any more and will fall in love with another girl, but I would so much like to have a son who looked like him!" That girl's name was Lisochka Arko; she was the daughter of a well-known actor. And the boy, Boria Dranov, became my husband in real life. But as they say, fairy tales are fast, and reality is slow. It's easier said than done.

Much water has flowed under the bridge, events came crushing down in a storm, turning our lives upside down before I met Boria Dranov when we were both seventeen years old.

A lot had happened during those ten years. Fishzon's company, his best actors, left for America, and my mother again had to act in different touring troupes. There was a family in one of them — husband, wife and two boys who were Aniuta's and my age.

The head of the family, a rather handsome man but a mediocre actor, began to court our mother, and she reciprocated his advances!

(Now, in retrospect, I understand: she was young, beautiful and talented but very lonely and had a difficult time taking care of two children.) But we, the kids, did not understand anything and had no idea what was going on.

1918 rolled in. My dad was about to come back from the front. We waited for him on pins and needles! For two days in a row, mom took us to the railway station to meet him, but he was not there! The entire town of Zhitomir knew that our dad was to come back from the front any day now. The following day mom decided not to go to the railway station, and Aniuta and I kept running out to the street every minute, in the hope that our father would suddenly show up. But our mom did not step out of the house.

And finally, finally, we saw a young man in uniform riding in a horse carriage. He grabbed us both, sat us down next to him. I could not sit still, I was so excited and eager to tell mom that our dad was back, that he was with us! But she still was not coming out, and it seemed strange to me that she did not rush to meet him like we did. An alarming premonition pricked me but my joy at seeing dad was so great that I forgot everything else. I only felt that a happy life was now ahead of us, now that our father was back with us.

And so, every night after the play was over, there were conversations between mom and dad. Those conversations were conducted in whisper not to wake us up. But we are awake! We lie in bed with our eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. We don't understand all of it, of course, but one terrible thought reaches our minds: our mom does not want to be with our dad!

One such night, little Aniuta jumped out of bed, went down on her knees, folding her little hands in prayer, and cried with tears running down her cheeks: "Mom, do not leave dad!" I lay in bed, sobbing.

Then we began to travel again from town to town. Dad was following us everywhere, hoping that life would come back to normal, for the sake of the children, if nothing else. I silently hated that actor who ruined our life, I made scenes to my mom and finally left her for my dad! Aniuta stayed with her. At the time the company played in Priluki where we lived for a year or two, if memory serves me.

My dad opened a theater studio there. (I remember him staging Pribyshevsky's "Remember Snow" in Yiddish.) My dad and I lived in a very nice house, with intelligent people.

But the times were restless: every day governing authorities changed hands in the town; one day it was Denikintsi¹ who staged a pogrom, now Petlurovtsi.² The best rooms in our house were taken by Prince Dolgoruky. One day he beat a peasant to death with his whip for hiding some foodstuffs from requisition.

One day Petlurovtsi broke into the house across the street and we could all hear: “Are there Jews here?” And a woman’s voice responding: “No. Nobody here!” We knew she was hiding Jews. “Jews are everywhere here!” the same voice yelled. All grown-ups in our house stood silently behind the curtains, with bated breath... The Petlurovtsi began banging on our doors but no one answered, and they left for some reason (probably thinking that Jews could not live in such a nice house). My friend and I lay in bed, clinging to each other, and cried with fear.

One day, the company left for another town—Lubni, I think—and my mother took Aniuta there with her. My father and I stayed in Priluki. I still have a faded letter I wrote to my little sister — a funny child’s letter about a boy I played ball with, and how we lost the ball and how I finally found it among the phlox flowers in the yard! I was already going to school then. That boy’s mother, a doctor, treated me for typhus. She respected my dad and was probably attracted to him a bit. Once she started preparing to move with her son to Argentina and my dad and I decided to follow them! They did go to Argentina, but my father and I stayed in Moscow for a while. Soon, he took me to my mom and tried again to rebuild the family for the sake of us, the children. He failed ... and left us! It was 1920 already. Soon I learned that he was acting in the Vilno troupe with very good, well-known actors, Adler among others.

I did not hear from him for a long time, but all the actors knew about him and said nothing to me, not wanting to upset me. Later I learned, quite by accident, that my dad had moved to Warsaw and that he got married! His wife was rumored to be a very beautiful woman, also an actress, who had lost her husband; he was reportedly killed in a train during the Civil War. She was left alone with her son, a very talented boy, who was raised by my father. They were was a close and happy family.

And so here I was, back with my mother and Aniuta, in the troupe where that actor I hated so much also worked. He lived with his family but that did not stop him from being unfaithful to his wife. Mother and we fell on hard times. It was 1921 or 1922.

¹ Denikintsi (Denikin’s men) – soldiers in General Denikin’s White Russian army fighting the Bolsheviks in Russia and the Ukrainian army under Semyon Petliura during 1918-1920. Responsible for numerous Jewish pogroms in Ukraine.

² Petlurovtsi (Petliura’s men) – soldiers in the Ukrainian army under the command of Semyon Petliura, a prominent Ukrainian politician, who, in 1919-22, fought Russian Bolsheviks and Denikin’s White Russian army for Ukraine’s independence. Responsible for numerous Jewish pogroms in Ukraine.

The troupe toured the towns on the Volga. For a long time, we lived in Kanavino, a sloboda on the outskirts of Nizhni Novgorod with a large Jewish population.

Mother barely eked out a living, the area was stricken with hunger, and she gave us all the meager food she managed to scrape, all of it. And she went hungry, of course! In Kazan, I already was in the fifth grade and had some success performing in a school concert; I recited Nadson.³ And I took part in mom's theater plays too and was very proud that I was contributing at least something to the family.

We starved terribly. One day, as we were going down the stairs we found a bundle wrapped in a rag by the door. We unwrapped it and cried with joy! It was a large piece, probably two pounds, of melted butter. We shared that butter with another family, and we the children enjoyed that unexpected gift as a delicious dish!

I even had a "suitor" in Kazan; he was a schoolmate, two or three years my senior. He stood under our hotel windows for hours. He was flattered that I was an "actress" in the theater. But I did not fancy him.

In 1924, the troupe moved, and we found ourselves in Briansk. I even played a role with the famous Libert, I can't remember which. I only know that it was one of Libert's best roles. I was still a very inexperienced actress and was not very interested in acting on the stage. I wanted to study, go to school and be among my peers. But school had to be interrupted because of the troupe's frequent moves.

Arriving in a new town, the actors almost never stayed in hotels but rented rooms or apartments from private people. It was the same in Briansk. There were very few Jews there at the time and the box office was very low. We had to move out of the apartment as we could not afford it and joined another actor's family with two children. We drank tea from the samovar and shared meager meals together.

One day we learned from letters we received from actor friends that Klara Young had come to perform in the Soviet Union from America. The famous Klara Young! They wrote that she was giving performances in Moscow! That the best of the old Yiddish actors were working with her—such as Rubin, Trilling, Lakhmansha, Yunesko, Spektorov, Kantorovich, the actors who used to work with my mother! A "family council" was held by the troupe's actors who were helping me (with my mom's consent, which was grudgingly given). They we wrote a letter to some actor friends, asking them to recommend me to Youngwitz, Klara Young's husband.

³ Nadson, a nineteenth century Russian poet, very popular in the early 1920s.

A couple of days later, literally, we received a telegram: “Let R. Kurtz go to Moscow as a chorus girl. Salary 100 rubles a month.” (In those days, in the summer of 1925, it was an enormous sum of money). One simply can’t imagine my joy!

But I also felt sadness and anxiety: I was not 17 yet. How was I to travel alone, on a train, among strangers, to another city? How was I to leave my mother and Aniuta in their desperate situation? On the other hand, I knew that my departure would ease their life; receiving such a huge salary I could help them!

So, we began to pack. I had nothing to wear. I had one blouse with beige edging. No winter coat, no overcoat, no underwear. Mother pawned some of her dresses and with that money sent me off to Moscow, packing a couple of her own shirts and dresses in a basket. The basket was carefully bound with rope, and mother admonished me not to leave it out of my sight lest it be stolen.

Many actors came to see me off, everybody cried. But my mother didn’t; only her voice was muffled and choked, to avoid tears, God forbid. I sat next to the basket all through the night, without sleeping a wink, all the way to Moscow. At the railway station I was met by smiling Kantorovich and Spektorov! (He was combining acting and administrative work in the theater). And right off the bat they told me that the chorus’ salary had been raised and I would be getting 125 rubles. My joy knew no bounds: I was among nice, friendly people and, most important, would be able to send money to my mom! I was introduced to Youngwitz, I sang for him and he seemed pleased. First thing, Sonia Kantorovich took me to a seamstress to order cambric shirts — they were not expensive, and gradually, after a long while, I even bought myself an overcoat!

My first performance was in “Jakele Blofer” where I sang and danced with two other chorus girls, playing a shoe shiner. I moved well and danced like a perky little boy I portrayed. Many actors stood in the wings watching me closely. As I learned later from students of Moscow music schools and conservatories who were also accepted in the chorus, everyone was watching me perform because I had been hired to replace a plain-looking short chorus girl. (Youngwitz selected only tall women for the chorus.) And though I was not much taller than her, my success inspired me; I was liked by everybody.

From then on, Youngwitz moved the taller women back. I and another actor’s daughter, Eva Sharavaer, later known as Nusya Sheinfeld, were moved to the front as the youngest, most agile and capable. Later on, when the season was over and Clara Young went back to America, our troupe received a vacation and I, feeling quite happy, went back home to my mom. During my vacation I received a letter from Rubin telling me that upon Young’s return I would get a major role in a new operetta, “Leibele, the Tramp,” and would be Clara Young’s partner!

My first appearance in that play: I stumble into a kissing couple. I must scream “Fire, Fire!!” I was young and naïve, I could not understand why I should lie since there was no fire! Why a fire if the people are kissing? And so one day, when I came to rehearsal, I discovered that the role had been given to Nusya Sheinfeld to rehearse who understood what was required of her. She was more experienced and very talented. To tell the truth, I was not upset by that replacement; on the contrary, I sighed with relief as if a huge weight was taken off my shoulders.

It was only for a moment that I felt baffled and confused by Nusya’s appearance in rehearsal, but I told myself: “That’s fine, I won’t have to lie and do something I do not like.” Immediately I felt relieved and any hurt feelings were gone.

After working with Young for another season, I went back to mom; she was working in Odessa then. There were many actors there, and soon Rubin, a wonderful actor whom I loved so much, joined us there. He had translated into Yiddish “The Staircase to Fame,” a play performed at Korsh Theater, where he played the lead. He also staged “The Bayadere” and the classical operetta “The Virtuous Susan.” He was great in every play, transforming himself in each role! To say nothing of his beautiful voice; he translated operatic arias into Yiddish and sang them in concerts. During Clara Young’s tour in the Odessa Opera Theater, its opera singers stopped, surprised, in the wings, hearing him sing.

Clara Young left a big mark on my acting career. Her repertoire seemed light-weight, operetta-like but she played with such taste, so tactfully, with such talent and charm that everything else seemed low and tacky in comparison. Although there were many very good actors in that company, she stood out and shined as the brightest star.

So, there I was again with my mom and Aniuta and began to play small roles in plays. Rubin even staged “200,000” by Sholom Aleichem, playing Shimele Soroker. Later I realized that he had been impressed by the GOSET’s production and Mikhoels’ performance in that role but he acted his own way and was very good. Soon he left. Rumor had it that he had wanted to play in the GOSET but was not accepted by Mikhoels and left for America. I know nothing of his life in the American theater. I wish I did; he was such a marvelous actor.

The theater we played in was a long way from the France Hotel in Deribasovskaya Street where we stayed. We played in a Jewish neighborhood and were popular with the public.

One day, a rumor spread that a young man named Boria Dranov was in the audience. He had recently arrived from Harbin, China, with his uncle and aunt who raised and housed him. The Dranovs had lived in Harbin for many years. They were all good actors, but the father was a very famous and talented dramatic actor.

In those days, actors (especially Yiddish actors) hauled a lot of baggage with them from town to town — costumes, props and other essentials. Upon arriving in Harbin (about 1916-17) the Dranovs received their luggage, but instead of the costumes it was filled with stones! And the elder Dranov, Nathan, lost his mind.⁴ He was sick for a long time and died in a hospital holding a golden pocket watch he had received for his benefit performance, bearing his initials N.D., and kept saying “En-De,” “En-De” – “the end”. (I was unable to take that beautiful watch covered with “American gold” out of the Soviet Union; I could not get a permit and left it with Aniuta who, I think, sold it before her departure to the U.S. I was very sorry that I didn’t take it with me; it was a memory of Boria’s father.)

Boria’s mother had left for America, and he stayed behind and became a young Communist (Komsomolets.) He did not want to go with her⁵ and stayed with his uncle and aunt who adored him. In 1926, the three of them came to Odessa and put up at the same France Hotel where we were staying.

So Boria, who had been in my heart since early childhood when I saw him in Fishzon’s railway car, was now walking together with our troupe’s actors towards France Hotel after the performance. He is walking in front, in the company of sociable Aniuta, my sister, and another actor girl, and I am walking behind with my mother, burning with curiosity and jealousy! I do not recall how it happened but towards the end of that road, we walked all together, and it seemed that he was addressing me more than the others. Our hearts reached for each other, and often, returning home together after the performance, we talked about many things. He was a very interesting, well-read and educated person.

Our hotel had a patio and balconies circling it, with room doors opening into them. Boria and I often sat on our balcony late into the night. Next to him I felt timid, hanging on his every word; he knew so much, his stories were so interesting! We would talk late into the night until his uncle appeared from across the patio, candle in hand; a little worried, he would call Boria to come home. A bit embarrassed, we would part reluctantly.

⁴ It is a family legend. I do not know if it is true. – A.D.

⁵ Rosa told me a little more than that. Boris’s mother, she said, had only enough money for the two of them to travel to California but not enough to get to New York, where Yiddish theater was thriving. So, she decided to leave Boria behind, planning to send for him later.

As I said, Boria was a Komsomolets and as such he was sent to a regional center to participate in “dekulakization”.⁶ Before his departure I plucked up the courage to say: “It is wrong for a girl to say this, but I would not like you to leave.” He left, proud of performing his Komsomol duty. To my joy, he came back a few days later. I think he did not like anything connected to Dekulakization: he was 18 and did not yet have a real understanding of Soviet life.

Young actors spent time enjoying themselves, having fun and taking part in many interesting undertakings. To say nothing of me: Boria was nearby!

I recall that one day before New Year’s I had a performance somewhere while the theater was preparing for a grand New Year’s ball. Boria loved to dance, so after my performance I rushed to the theater to be with him, to dance with him, and most important, to talk to him, to listen to him.

A happy, one-of-a-kind time of my life! But soon my happiness came to an end: the theater was preparing to go to Bobruisk! I remember our last meeting before my departure. Mother permitted me to stay out till midnight. The troupe was to leave early the next morning. Aniuta, although two and a half years younger than me, had a suitor, Nolia Emiliev, a much older, rather attractive man who had already been married and divorced. He often came to the theater, sitting in front rows.

According to him, he was at first interested in me. But I took no notice and he switched over to Aniuta. She did take notice and they started a love affair. That night, we two couples walked around the hotel, having agreed to meet at home by the appointed hour. Of course, we came back late, and mom put us through the ringer, giving us an awful dressing-down. My happiness ended so prosaically!

Boria and I gave each other a pledge to stay in touch. He was about to leave for Moscow to go to college, and I wanted to quit the nomadic life and, if I was to be an actress, to enroll in an actor’s studio, to get a theater education. Maybe we could meet in Moscow? The next morning the troupe left, and Boria and I parted for long!

⁶Dekulakization (raskulachivanie) – Soviet campaign of dispossession of kulaks (well-to-do peasants), expropriation of their land and grain stocks, evictions, arrests, exile and executions as part of Stalin’s collectivization program. That campaign started in earnest later, in 1930, but mom is telling about Boris being recruited into it in about 1926, so it looks like it was an early, relatively mild stage of the campaign, a few years before it turned into a policy of “eliminating kulaks as a class.”

After Odessa, Bobruisk seemed very dull and gray. But constant correspondence with Boria kept alive my hope of meeting him in Moscow before long, a hope for a wonderful future.⁷ (I have some of those letters.)

My theater continued its travels from town to town. Back in Odessa, a young and very talented actor, Lesia Meerson, had joined the troupe. His talent revealed itself especially during our tours; he was very good in all his roles. As in Odessa, we were having a good time, went to the beach and roamed about town in our free time. He was attracted to me, but I only liked him as an actor.

After a while, he joined another theater and wrote to me from there that I had made a mistake not reciprocating his feelings; still, he was asking me to join his troupe and work with him. Many years later, when we met, he would talk about that. (I have saved some of his letters.)

In 1927, our troupe arrived in Minsk. That city had a permanent Yiddish theater — BelGOSET, Belarus State Yiddish Theater. It was on tour when we played there. Of course, we were no match for it; theirs was a state theater with wonderful young actors under the direction of Rafalsky. But soon rumors started that they would select the best actors from our troupe, add a few more from other groups, and create a new state-sponsored theater in another city. That actually materialized, later; the newly established company became the Odessa State Yiddish Theater (Odessa GOSET) under the direction of E.M. Loiter.

But I am ahead of myself again.

I now want to tell you about my little sister Aniuta. Before we arrived in Minsk (I can't remember what town we were in then), Aniuta announced that she was getting married! She was only 16. My mother and I were appalled! But no amount of persuasion had any effect, and one fine day — no, one very sad day — we saw her off to Stalino, a seedy little town (former Yuzovka, renamed, after Stalin's death, Donetsk, which became a modern beautiful city.) I gave her my favorite dress of black liberty; I had nothing else to give her. She stood in the railway car portal bursting into tears — she was so fragile, so defenseless, still a child. At 16, she was going away to marry a man we hardly knew! We also wept, standing on the platform. Feeling orphaned, we trudged home.

⁷ We began to write to each other, and our correspondence lasted for over two years. His letters were so interesting, informative and thought-provoking; it seemed he wrote so effortlessly, so spontaneously! And I sat over my letters for a long time, wanting to express what I felt as best I could... but what came out sounded clumsy and childish. I was always afraid that my letters were dull and of no interest to him. I have saved most of his letters (and even a few of mine) and one can see from their addresses that they came to all the towns and shtetls where our wandering theater traveled.

The marriage was unhappy. Many years later she told us that her husband had a very bad temper and was impossible to bear from the first. They moved to Kharkov, Ukraine's capital in those days. In 1935, Aniuta gave birth to a daughter, Iva. Unable to tolerate her husband's temper, after six years of marriage, Aniuta took her one-year-old daughter to our mother in Odessa. There they shared the joys and hardships until the Second World War when all of us reunited in evacuation in Tashkent.

Aniuta's life was very hard; she was raising a daughter all by herself. She worked as a typist to make a living. (Over time she became a very good, skilled typist.) All her life she barely made ends meet. Her optimism and cheerful, sociable disposition helped her a lot.

So, my mother and I remained in Minsk without Aniuta. I continued to correspond with Boria. At first, he had a very hard time in Moscow; no friends, no one he knew. He slept on boulevards or in an abandoned shed, carrying a little cushion with him.

It was very hard, almost impossible in those days to get admitted to an institute (college.) He applied to three — Industrial College, College of Film-Making and the Law School of Moscow University. And he was admitted in all three. Vishinski⁸ accepted him to the second year of law school, having said, "This young man's tongue is well hung."

Minsk became a turning point in my life. First of all, Boria came to see me during his winter break; he was already a university student, studying and working at the Red October candy factory. He believed that he had to be closer to the working class and abandon the ways and habits of the "intelligentsia." We were together for two days without parting— two happy days! And again, we gave each other a pledge — to meet in Moscow.

Do svidania, my love!

Soon thereafter the BELGOSET, having returned from the tour, announced admission to an itinerant troupe that was supposed to play in the towns and shtetls of Belarus. Experienced actors from our troupe, Feldman and Leshinskaya, and I, a promising young actress, sat for an examination by two directors of the future theater, Aisenberg and Litvinov (who had put on "Fuente Ovejuna" by Lope de Vega at BELGOSET, with great success.)

⁸ Andrei Vishinski, Soviet politician, lawyer and diplomat, chief prosecutor in Stalin's political trials in 1936-37. Soviet state prosecutor in the Nuremberg trials. Soviet Foreign Minister from 1949 to 1953, ambassador to the UN 1953-54. Rector of Moscow University.

The examination was very difficult; I was given one sketch after another to act out, having never done anything like that before. I did what was requested of me the best I could. An ardent desire to be admitted and to become part of Jewish culture, to be among interesting, talented, modern people helped me. Long after that examination I could not pull myself together from exhaustion and anxiety.

We were admitted to the new theater, to my mom's horror and anguish. She was remaining alone! But do you worry about things like that when you are 18 or 19? You long to get out, to live an independent life. Entering that theater seemed to make my dream closer to reality! I saw that job as a step to future studies in Moscow, to meeting with my dear Boria. Also admitted were a few young men and women who had never worked in the theater before. Some of them were quite capable and had a great command of Yiddish.

We started studio work, attending lectures, meetings, mainly with Aisenberg, Litvinov and Rafalsky, BelGOSET's artistic director (he later disappeared in the Gulag without a trace.)

We went to classes and worked with Litvinov on "The Steppe Is Burning," a play by Vevterka, and soon were touring Belarus, continuing intense studies at the same time. To live in an itinerant theater on wheels was rather hard but we were young, enthusiastic about our art and that gave us strength and hope for a better future.

After working in that troupe for a year and earning a vacation, I finally went to Moscow in the spring of 1928 to take entrance exams at the studio of the Moscow Yiddish Theater which had just returned from a sensational tour of Europe. Its artistic director Granovsky did not return. He was replaced by Solomon Mikhailovich Mikhoels.

Boria could not meet me. He was one of the organizers of the first Young Pioneers rally and lived in Zamoskvorechie⁹ where he had been given a very good room in a communal apartment. The door was unlocked, I went in and I waited for him all day. I ended up falling asleep on the edge of the bed. Towards evening he showed up, smiling, apologetic for not meeting me. And we spent an unforgettable evening together! The next day he rushed to his rally and I started preparing for the exams.

At last, the long-awaited day arrived. All the future students sit in the auditorium. A large table is set up in front of the orchestra, with Mikhoels, Litvinov, Dobrushin and many other people, unknown to me, sitting behind it. There are about 30 to 35 people taking the exams. Quite a few young people auditioned before I did but no one was out of the ordinary.

⁹ A district of Moscow, on the right bank of the Moskva River.

Only one guy, Boria Kreigman, quite plain-looking, seemed gifted to me but he was too stereotyped, likely under the influence of provincial actors visiting his town.

Finally, my turn came. The examiners asked me a few biographical questions. (I was unable to answer one political question.) Then I was asked to go on the stage. I was as anxious as all those before me but was sure of the poem I recited: I had rehearsed it with Rafalsky in the itinerant theater. Right away I knew that the committee liked what I was doing. In the end, Mikhoels asked me to say “Once there was a king...” And I said it like a child who heard that word for the first time. I even chuckled with surprise and bewilderment: what kind of word was it, “a king,” when there were no kings? Everyone laughed and I knew I had passed!

Later Mandel, the party secretary of the theater, walked me home (from Malaya Bronnaya to Arsentievsky Alley where Boria lived), congratulating me sincerely with my admission. I was the only one admitted; Kreigman (who later became a very good actor and got rid of his shtetl-like clichés) was admitted conditionally.

Intense work began. Suffice it to say that lectures on acting were delivered by Mikhoels, Zavadsky (Stanislavsky’s method) and Kaverin, very popular then. Studies in voice and breathing control (endless recitations of hexameter!), rhythm, gymnastics, movement, lectures on literature, etc., etc. All of that was fascinating.

We all went hungry, of course, but no one particularly suffered or mentioned it; we were so overwhelmed by all those new captivating experiences that absorbed us. When I had no money to buy even tea and sugar, I would get a small package from mom! It was as if she felt when I needed her help the most: the packages contained chocolate butter, cookies and everything else that she was able to scrape or save from her modest budget. (My fellow students living in the next room confessed to me a long time afterwards that they had been sneaking through the narrow passageway separating our rooms to secretly treat themselves to my parcel’s contents.)

Kreigman and I received a stipend of 35 rubles for the two of us: I got 20 and he 15. I earned that twenty rubles as the studio’s secretary, and Kreigman, his fifteen rubles, for acting as my liaison with the faculty, doing all kinds of errands. I sometimes stayed behind after classes to clean the rooms, earning another ruble and a half. The following year I was already earning 35 rubles by myself.

The lectures were amazing, especially those by Zavadsky, and we forgot all else. But lectures by Mikhoels were the most fascinating. We often had to wait for him for hours, but communicating with him was riveting. He was quite fond of us; it seemed that he too had a good time talking to us. He spent all his free time with us.

At first, Elsha Bezverkhnyaya, another girl and I shared a room in the theater, but the following year we moved to a hostel on Nikolskaya Street, across from GUM which opened many years later. It was a large light-filled room with many beds, placed right next to one another. It was to that room that after my first year at the studio I brought Mania Karlos, an actor's daughter, and coached her for the exams which she later passed with flying colors. Her father, however, held a grudge against me for a long time for taking his daughter away from him.

My studies were more than successful. I felt that I was coping with every task, that I was loved by everybody. That happiest time of my life was darkened by one event, however.

After my first year at the studio, returning to Moscow after a vacation, I came to Boria's place and found a Russian-looking girl there! She left quickly, and Boria, returning from his factory, explained that she was a co-worker. During my absence, his mother had come from America to visit him and left a few little gifts for me. I felt that Boria was holding something back, that he had changed. On one day, leaving all those gifts behind, I went to live with the girls in that room in the theater. After a while I learned that Boria had moved to Tverskoy Boulevard.

We agreed that I would stop by to gather the few belongings remaining at his place. The apartment where he lived was a typical Moscow communal flat. The corridor was filled all the way to his door with all kinds of junk. The room was a mess. I gathered my things, we walked out together, and then, looking very embarrassed, he said, "I got married! To Maria" (the girl I had seen at his place). I said good-bye quickly and trudged along to my place. He walked with me for a while, but my throat was so choked that I was afraid to turn my head, fearing I would burst into tears. I said good-bye quickly and returned to the hostel.

I did not share my grief with anyone and hid my pain inside my heart. My consolation and refuge were my studio studies, an interesting, fascinating process of learning. Every time, walking from the studio which was located in Stoleshnikov Alley to the theater in Malaya Bronnaya, I passed Boria's building and peered, from afar, at his window. I could see a small mural I had given to him, but it soon disappeared, and I realized that he had moved.

My second year of studies was just as interesting, and Solomon Mikhailovich was still close with us — until a misfortune struck: Pennochka, a student from my year, died after an operation on her eardrum, a complication after the flu. We took her death very hard. She was so buoyant, so happy; she had recently been married. Gifted, sunny, young — and now she was dead! Immediately, we felt Mikhoels' alienation, he drifted away from us. Of course, that death stunned him. Gradually, he came to see us less and less often.

In the summer of 1930, GOSET selected a small group from our year, including me, to go on a tour. And early the next year, a year before graduation, I was admitted in the theater troupe! My fellow students Tsibulevsky and Pustylnik were also admitted. In 1932, my entire year was admitted. We rehearsed and played in “The Witch,” a production that had made GOSET famous (it was produced at the same time as the famous “Princess Turandot” in the Evg. Vakhtangov Theater.)

Of course, what had come naturally to the young actors of the GOSET in those days was strange for us, inexperienced rookies, and we copied, mechanically, what those actors had been doing. But it seemed we only interfered with the main performers, got in the way. And they were not patient or tactful with us, expressing their annoyance right on the stage. Slowly, each of us in his or her own way, adjusted, found our footing, accepted the atmosphere of that unconventional production.

I accepted the principles of GOSET and that production on faith, as folk-acting on the square: free-wheeling “Purim spielers” (jesters) or characters from the Italian del arte theater. I tried to understand, to make sense of my conduct on the stage, of the mis-en-scenes offered to me. Looking back, I realize that our participation in that production was a mistake. That was a time of searching for new forms and means of expression; it was not accidental that Granovsky had stayed abroad, feeling that he had exhausted himself in his theater.

Everything about GOSET impressed me, particularly the acting of Mikhoels and Zuskin, which stood out in its spontaneity and expressiveness, especially against the background of formalism typical of most other actors.

Accepting, young as I was, everything in that theater, I gave up previous influences, my past experience, my spontaneous expression of feelings and sensible conduct on the stage. I was confident that GOSET was the best theater in the world and that was the proper way to act!

Over the years I realized that all that was superficial, that I should not have abandoned my principles and experience. And while I had felt free and unfettered in the studio, surrounded by love and attention, I felt somewhat cold and alienated in the theater, although I was treated well, no longer feeling the warmth and unity of actors of the troupe I had worked in before.

Solomon Mikhailovich treated me very well, I loved talking to him, hanging on his every word. Often we heard that one had to be in the theater for five years before getting a small role (a two-word line), that one had to be “corpulent.” We were all slender, thin girls, however! I see it all differently now, but in those days we believed that was how it should be.

After a while, I got a “part” in Bergelson’s play, consisting of one line: “Yes, father, but why did they call us here?” Working at the table with all the actors engaged in the play, Mikhoels coached me, dictating a tone for the line. From his tone I saw that the girl I was to play was stuck-up and spoiled. But inwardly I resisted the ready-made tone he insisted on.

I thought that the tone should come from my communication with the partner, from the inner life of the character, but I had no guts to argue with Mikhoels. And, like a parrot, I mimicked his tone, deciding “Why resist? After all, that one little line does not make or break the play.”

I understand now that much of what I accepted uncritically due to my youth and fascination with that theater did me a lot of harm as an actress. I thought that I should act in a different way here, do unconventional things, give up the way I had been — natural, unfettered by any formal devices. Three years of study had distanced me from my previous life in the theater. I seemed to myself a helpless child making first steps.

In the play “Three Little Raisins” I was brought in as a third “raisin;” in “The Evening with an Old Fisherman” I played a young man, along with three other dancers. I watched them for a long time, at first trying to learn their movements. But gradually I began to give my own content, my own meaning to the dance: that was, as I saw it, an exalted young man with his head in the clouds, talking to God. Later I learned that everyone had liked my performance.

If my memory serves me, the theater put on “The Wailing Wall,” in which I was given a part consisting of four or five lines. It was considered a big part for a fledgling actress — the part of Zabeida, an Arab girl oppressed, like all her people, by the British and in love with her fiancée Zaal with whom she was forced to part. The play was staged by Fedorov, a director from the Meyerhold Theater.¹⁰ My few lines drowned in numerous mis-en-scenes made up by the director. I was constantly pushed around, by my grandfather, by my fiancé, and had to crawl all over the stage from one end to the other. It was too much of an overload for such a small part!

The audience had no time to feel the charisma and tragedy of that Arab girl, no time to figure her out because she flickered and darted about on the stage so much. It was my fault; having received my first “big” part, I tried to put all my soul into it, and the part did not withstand the director’s and my own overload.

The music for that production was written by composer Milner, and I sang Zabeida’s song addressed to her fiancé.

¹⁰ V. Meyerhold, a prominent Soviet theater director, actor and producer. His provocative experiments with physical being and symbolism in an unconventional theater made him one of the seminal forces in contemporary international theater. He was arrested, tortured and executed in 1940.

The composer was taken aback when Mikhoels ordered me to sing it from the orchestra pit. By that time, Mikhoels was not treating me the way he used to. I felt it, but tried to dismiss those thoughts. But soon I felt a vacuum and emptiness around me. Now, many years later, I understand what underground currents had changed Mikhoels' attitude toward me.

After some time, Solomon Mikhailovich's wife Levitas, a good actress, still young, suddenly died. He took her death very hard. His first wife lived separately, with his two daughters. The girls often came to see him in the theater. He had left them long before my entering the studio and had married Levitas, who had also left her husband, actor Chechik, assistant director and Solomon's faithful right hand, for him. That sudden death stunned everyone but also lit a light of hope in some of the women working in the theater.

I understand now that Solomon Mikhailovich wanted very much to be closer with me. I know that he had asked Chechik to help him with that. But Chechik saw him as a rival; while I was still in the studio he was writing me affectionate letters which amused and annoyed me. I am glad now that I did not understand any of that then, although I did feel that something was going on around me. I kept telling myself that it was only my imagination, so absurd it seemed.

Later I came to realize that I had been correct in my feelings. I was not getting work. They only engaged me in crowd scenes. Many of my former fellow students received parts and I sat in the audience as a stranger. I was gradually losing what I had learned in the previous years and was also losing self-confidence, the worst thing for an actress.

The atmosphere around me was made even more complicated by my affair with Veniamin Lvovich Zuskin. At first, I did my best to avoid him. But when he began setting up a theater archive and museum, he recruited Sara Fabrikant and me into that project. It was very exciting, and I enjoyed it a great deal — until I realized that he was showing a special interest in me. I avoided him, trying to overlook his advances, but he continued to pursue me. I was appalled at the thought of his wife; I respected her and often wanted to go to her and talk about what was going on.

But she, apparently feeling or having noticed something, acted in hostile manner. Not even hiding her hatred, one day she physically pushed me during a performance on the stage, expecting a reaction. I tried to overlook that and tried even harder to avoid Zuskin. But he continued to pursue me. And I gave in — so lonely and sad was my life at the time. Compared with everyone's indifference to me, his attention seemed like a relief of sorts. And of course, my youth and credulity worked against me. All that depressed me a great deal. I lived in a constant state of anxiety and isolation.

In 1933, Aniuta came to visit me from Stalino where she lived with her husband. I recall that she brought lots of candies with her. Plain candies stuffed with something — that was a gift of luxury in my modest life. I recall scurrying around shops, looking for cups for her, and barely managed “to get a few glasses. She did not stay long.

Having seen her off to the station, I returned to the theater; there was some sort of banquet there. I felt low: my mother was having trouble in her theater, Aniuta’s visit was a hassle. (I had just rented a corner in Sretenka, and Aniuta had to spend the night at a friend’s place.) In addition, my situation in the theater and my affair — all of that depressed me. I left the banquet early, before it ended.

As I was leaving, I recall glancing at the clock; it was 11. I walked towards the Nikitski Gate, where Tram A was running towards Sretenka. After that – a total blank! I came to the next day at the Sklifasofsky Hospital. It was hard to open my eyes due to a splitting headache. For a long time, I lay in a large ward with many patients, trying to figure out what had happened to me. I tried to recall the details of the previous day: seeing off Aniuta, the banquet, glancing at the wall clock as I left, and I drew a complete blank after that. I must have been run over by a motor car! That meant it had happened during the night.

It was evening now, it was getting dark. What play was on today? “Three Little Raisins,’ probably. I called the nurse, asking her to call the theater and tell them that I was in the hospital and could not play in the third “raisin.” As I learned later, everybody in the theater was alarmed: I had never missed a theater appearance before without notice. Everyone concluded that I had had an accident and had to be looked for at the Sklifasofsky.

Later it became known that I had indeed been run over by a car, that I was taken to a pharmacy next to the Nikitski Gate and received first aid there; that when asked for my name, I gave someone else’s, that going through my purse, they found 60 rubles and decided that I had stolen it. Fortunately, they also found an Udarnik (shock worker) of socialist labor card which led them to trust me. And the 60 rubles was for the rent I was going to pay to the lady who was leasing me a corner in her room in Sretenka.

The next morning, they stitched a wound in my head which turned out to be not too serious. I stayed in the hospital for a while, whereupon I was given a voucher to Abramtsevo, a rest-house for writers, where I stayed a whole month, having a very good time. It had a room where Gogol had read out loud the second part of “The Dead Souls” and ran away afterwards; there was Vrubel’s statue there too. Well-known writers had visited that house, formerly belonging to the writer Aksakov. Film director Pudovkin and other filmmakers were taking a vacation there during my stay.

It was winter already and many people skied. I was gradually recovering and observing cheerful and interesting people. As usual, my shyness and timidity stood in the way of my meeting them easily. I returned from Abramtsevo quite recovered and ready to work again.

1934 came around. It was a very good and joyful year for me.

Director Rotbaum who came over from Poland to visit his sister Sara, our leading actress, gave me regards from my father, a wonderful actor, the only one, he said, who was met with applause by the Yiddish audience in Warsaw. Rotbaum told me many nice things about him; during our tour in Minsk I even called my dad on the telephone. After so many years of separation, I heard his dear voice. I knew he was married to actress Dina Shayevich, a very beautiful woman he loved dearly. She had a son from a previous marriage, who went to the Warsaw Conservatory and graduated, with flying colors, as a violinist and conductor. My father, deprived of his own children, raised and loved him as his own.

Five years later, that young man fled from occupied Poland to Bialystok, hoping to get his family out too; he even came to Moscow for a couple of days. Together with him, I sent a small parcel to Warsaw from the Main Post Office, realizing, though, that my father and his wife were unlikely to receive it.

A Lexicon of Yiddish actors, writers and Jewish public figures who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto has been published in America. An extract from that volume was sent to me in Moscow in 1978 by my son's American friend Joseph Drew. I found in it an article about my father, with his photos, wonderful reviews and details of how he died. Till his last day in the Ghetto he played in the Eldorado Theater. One day his wife disappeared; he rushed out looking for her, was caught by the Germans and sent to Treblinka where he died.

After the war, the famous actor Morevsky sent me my father's photograph in the make-up from Shakespeare's "Tempest" in which my dad was a great success. Ida Kaminskaya, the actress, told me about it too after the war. Even here, in America, there are actors who knew and worked with my father; I hope to see them some day. I sent my father's photos and other documents to Israel, to Yad Vashem, and to the Holocaust Study Center in New York. That is all that I know about my father, a wonderful person and a very good actor.

I should, however, return to 1934 which was a very happy year for me. I talked with Warsaw from Minsk on the telephone. I heard my father's voice, cheerful and tender, he said many kind words to me, something I had been deprived of, and missed so much for many years.

In my memory, he remained a wonderful father, very gentle and kind. He soon sent me a package which, among other things, contained a piece of fabric for a dress. It was quite timely. I had a magnificent outfit made from it for the theater's fifteenth anniversary. Then he sent me and Aniuta his photos. We corresponded; I have saved two or three of his letters.

And then...the Germans invaded Poland and our communication was interrupted, forever.

That year I was traveling with the theater on a country tour, and we arrived in Dnepropetrovsk. Having settled with Sarochka Fabrikant in an apartment rented for us, I set out to see the city and was going to stop by the theater, when suddenly a smiling Boria appeared out of nowhere in front of me. It was like a bolt from the blue!

It turned out that he knew about my auto accident and said he felt like it was he who had run me over. He said many nice and kind words to me. In the past years, he had graduated from the university and was in Dnepropetrovsk on an assignment from Tsentrosoyuz, a trade union, to inspect restaurants. He had found out that I would be in Dnepropetrovsk with the theater.

I was very surprised and upset: why Tsentrosoyuz? What did he have to do with it? Why restaurants? What for? In the evening after the play, he took me out to dinner, and we talked about many things. Quite candidly, he told me that he had had a baby who got entangled in the umbilical cord during birth and choked. So, nothing tied him to Maria anymore, he said.

We agreed that he would part company with Tsentrosoyuz and apply to a post-graduate course at the university. That evening it felt like we met each other for the first time all over again. We even danced a tango to the music of "Oh, those black eyes". (Since then, after so many years, I feel excited every time I hear that melody, my heart aches and my eyes well up.) Boria loved to dance, and I, despite my timidity, did not say no and we danced a little bit. It was a magic evening.

A few days later he left; my heart was filled with joy, hope and anxiety. After my return to Moscow, we started dating again. I lived near the Red Gates: the theater was renting a two-room apartment there. I lived in the bedroom, and Minsker and Kreigman, my former classmates, lived in the pass-through room. Boria soon enrolled in the post-graduate program of Moscow University, and I continued my work in the theater. We began to see each other more often. It was so interesting to be with him that I forgot all else under the sun — just to hear him talk!

One day we went to the First Variety Show Contest which featured two complete unknowns — Arkady Raikin and Klavdia Shulzhenko. Nobody knew them at the time.

A thin tall young man, poorly dressed, in a jacket that he had outgrown long ago, with his hands sticking out from the sleeves, came on stage and with a straight face, performed funny sketches, but so unconventionally, in his own way, that everybody knew: a great actor, a great talent appeared in the theater. He received the first prize in that contest. Klavdia Shulzhenko also captured everyone's heart right away and went on to bring joy to listeners with her extraordinary singing for many years to come.

And now both are gone. She passed away first. On December 17, 1987, Raikin died too. It's hard to believe that he is no more. It seemed that he would live forever, that he and death were incompatible. A unique, wonderful actor, our favorite. And Boria and I were among his very first audience.

My dear Borenka! That year, when our love affair resumed, you and I went everywhere together — to museums, to the Caucasus-Russia Highway, to concerts, to the conservatory, to the theaters. While studying for your post-graduate degree, you earned a living giving lectures on philosophy and, when we got married, by writing articles on international law and international affairs for newspapers and magazines.

We settled in an apartment of our former theater manager Somov, in a very large room which seemed like a palace to us. We shared the apartment with another family — a man (an engineer, I think), his wife and child, a charming little girl who would tell her parents: "Oy, Uncle Boria kissed Aunt Rosa!" That girl's father was a cruel, despotic man. As we learned later, he was in a permanent feud with our former manager and transferred that hostility to us. We felt under his constant observation and tried to avoid him as much as possible.

It was there that on September 22, 1936 our wonderful boy, Tolechka, was born! We wanted to name him Nathan, in honor of Boria's father, a great actor, but a diminutive name did not sound right, and we chose a similar-sounding name, Anatoly, Tolik, Tolechka.

For the first three months, he slept non-stop during the day but at night he screamed non-stop. Boria watched me like a hawk from his couch and, having read all kinds of literature on child-rearing, gave me strict instructions about the baby. Accompanied by the little boy's incessant screams, I heard Boria's stern voice saying, "Don't pick him up!" "You gave him the pacifier again?" And I would feel lost from both the baby's screams and Boria's stern shouts. There was no help from our neighbors, except that sometimes, on occasion, the woman next door, in secret from her husband whom she was in fear of, would give me a piece of advice.

Later, everything worked out fine, but papa Boria's control remained very strict. He was a wonderful father, gentle and caring. And our boy grew very attractive and good-looking by the time he was three months old.

We had his pictures taken; according to our friends and other people, those photos were soon sold in Moscow as postcards. I have saved those photos. I often admire them and cry.

We did not enjoy the manager's room for long; he returned, and we had to vacate the comfortable room and move to a den in a semi-basement in the theater building where other theater staff who had no place to go lived also. Our boy was not yet a year old when, in the summer of 1937, we rented a dacha together with Boria's friend Ilya Vaisfeld and his family.

Ilusha Vaisfeld had been Boria's classmate back in Harbin; by this time, he was head of the screenplay department at Mosfilm and later a VGIK¹¹ professor and a Ph.D. His wife's name was Lina; she was a writer; they had two daughters, Lialya and Natasha, five and two years old. The dacha was in Mamontovka; we had a lot of fun there in our free time, having interesting discussions and playing games. Aniuta and little Iva were with us, too.

After that summer, we were to move back to our awful tiny den! But I recall that Boria and Maria had a two-room apartment in Ipatievsky Alley whose windows faced the Party Central Committee, and it occurred to him that it should be easy to exchange that apartment for two rooms in a different area. Maybe he had lived there by himself after his divorce. I can't remember. I only know that Boria would have never left Maria, had the baby survived.

And, oh happiness! He got a room on Nikitsky Boulevard, not far from the theater in Malaya Bronnaya Street. It was on the fourth floor with no elevator, but that was only half the trouble; to our dismay, the communal apartment was chock-full of neighbors. One woman even lived in a kitchen nook which probably had been a servant's quarters in the old days.

The neighbors, as we soon found out, were bullies, full of hostility to everyone and everything. We were only saved in the summer when we went to the country; we enjoyed our freedom there. Boria was working at a newspaper, where he headed the international department, and he often published articles on international subjects, which enjoyed great success. He was respected and well-liked by the newspaper staff.

The trouble was that, by the time our relationship resumed, Boria was already very sick. He told me about it right away. He had become ill when working in that candy factory. He had stood all day next to a huge vat into which he had to pour milk from large cans many times during the workday.

¹¹ VGIK - Soviet National Film Institute

The temperature in the shop was high. There was a door nearby, always open to let in fresh air. (High temperature and an open door any time of the year.) Russian guys did not stay long in that job, but a Jewish university guy wanted to prove his mettle.

So, by the time we got married he was already very sick. It was his back, the Bekhterev disease. He explained to me that salts were deposited between the vertebrae and slowly calcified, bending the spinal cord forward. The salts caused the vertebrae to expand, painfully reacting to every movement. He felt terrible pain when someone just passed by, without even touching him.

He was treated by Burdenko and some other professors; he would take a ten-day therapy course and forget about it for the next thirty days. His physique fundamentally was strong, with a good foundation laid in his childhood. On another professor's advice, he also went to the Institute of Physical Therapy to work out on exercise equipment and machines to prevent calcification. Those exercises were painful, but the professor said they were the only way, that an effective medication was to come around "soon," but for now there wasn't any.

Boria was a healthy-looking, broad-shouldered, handsome man, and when we got married, one could not even imagine what would happen to him in later years.

Now I think that when his mother came from America in the late twenties to see him, offering to take him with her and he refused, he made a fatal mistake. (How many mistakes and silly errors we make in life, realizing it too late.) When his condition became worse, I even suggested that he leave me to be with his mother and bring me over later, if he wanted. I thought to myself that if he loved me, he would do so, and if not, his health was more important. As for me, what was in store was to happen no matter what. But he did not want to go.

His illness progressed slowly but he believed in his recovery! And in 1936, when our Tolechka was born, everything was fine; we were happy and enjoyed life. I recall that early in 1938 we rented a dacha in Kratovo where Aniuta and little Iva lived with us.

In 1937, however, my situation in the theater took a turn for the worse. I wrote a letter to Mikhoels. I sat over it a long time, not sure how to begin. To say, "Respected Solomon Mikhailovich" seemed too formal and trite; so, exhausted by my indecision, I started the letter without addressing him at all. I asked him why, having graduated from the studio with such success and being admitted to the theater long before graduation, was I not getting any parts? Was I worse than all my classmates? I received no answer.

Some time later, I spoke at a theater staff meeting attended by Litvakov, the editor of *Der Emes*, a Yiddish newspaper, poets Peretz Markish¹² and Samuel Galkin, and many other well-known figures. I said that I was astonished that a theater such as GOSET, with its own character and style, known the world over, included in its troupe actors who acted in different manners and styles, often inconsistent with the theater's trend. I said I thought there were many indifferent and accidental people in the theater, that some of the actors were overlooked and relegated to the last place.

In the end, I asked the question that bothered me the most: why was I not getting parts? Could it be because I had a child? (During my speech I saw Litvakov nodding his head in agreement.) The meeting continued the next day, but I could not attend, unable to leave little Tolik for two days in a row. Mikhoels chewed me out, focusing on my letter to him, so disrespectful that it had no address even. He "played" my letter in such a way, "performed" it so that I looked like an idiot and a bad actress.

Also attending that meeting were party officials who brought up the case of the theater's general manager, Ida Vladimirovna Lashevich. A purge of the party ranks was going on in those days, but Mikhoels spoke highly of her as an excellent manager and person. She was indeed the best of all the managers who had come before her. She had brought the theater out of stagnation, enforced discipline and attracted the public's attention to it. On her invitation, Karl Radek, Lazar Kaganovich and other high-ranking officials came to visit: she knew them personally as she and her husband were both old Bolsheviks. But her husband had been a Menshevik, and he was eliminated even before she came to the theater. For a while Mikhoels was able to protect her but not for long. Soon she too disappeared in the Gulag, forever!

She treated me very well. I used to visit her in the government building now known as "the house on the embankment,"¹³ next to the Udarnik movie theater, in her apartment, furnished with valuable rarities brought over from China where her husband, I think, had been an ambassador for a while.

I was still engaged only in crowd scenes; sometimes, I was offered a part to replace a sick actress. In "Freylekhs," I once replaced Rom, a merited actress, who was sick, in the part of a poor aunt who came to the wedding uninvited¹⁴. She appeared from the wings, poorly dressed, and sang a song saying that although she had not been invited, she came anyway because she was an aunt after all. During a dance scene she threw off her rags and appeared in a beautiful dress, dancing with the servant boys.

¹² Executed in 1952 together with Zuskin and other Jewish cultural figures.

¹³ A notorious building where many important people lived, many of them taken away in the 1937 purges, never to be heard from again

¹⁴ As far as I know, "Freylekhs" was not put on by the GOSET until 1945. I may be wrong.

The day of the performance I was asked to attend a rehearsal and waited for Solomon Mikhailovich for several hours — from morning till 5 p.m.. He came by the end of the day and showed us the *mise-en-scènes*. Emil May, our choreographer, who had brilliantly staged the dances in that play, showed me the movements. It was two or three hours before curtain. I ran home to arrange everything for Boria and Tolechka and rushed back to the theater.

I cannot describe my anxiety; May showed me one thing and Mikhoels something quite different. Standing in the wings before my entrance, I thought in horror, “I must remember everything Mikhoels showed me.” (What could he show in half an hour of rehearsal?) I felt his “directions” vanish from my head and was quite high-strung. My state of mind captured the audience the moment I appeared. A woman screamed, frightening and stimulating me at the same time. I forgot everything, all Mikhoels’s *mise-en-scènes* and directions. Unexpectedly to everyone, myself included, I played the scene with pathos and inspiration. It was such an unexpected joy! My success was overwhelming. After the play was over, everyone came over to congratulate, kiss and express their admiration for me.

But Mikhoels was not there. Contrary to custom, however (the understudy normally played every third performance), I was allowed to replace Rom, a merited actress, every other performance. (Although I was a great success in that role, I think I did not play it as well later.)

Even Boria wanted to see me in that role, although he was sick and his forays into the world usually ended badly. But that time everything went well. He was glad at my success; his spirits were high, and that gave him strength; we rejoiced together.

One day Mikhoels was in the audience. I did not know that. After the performance he suddenly appeared in our dressing room. I got scared and turned away momentarily. I made myself turn back right away, but he was already gone.

My participation in “Freylekhs” occurred after the war, when we returned from the evacuation and after Mikhoels came back from America. He had staged “Freylekhs” shortly before the war and that play won admiration of the Jewish — and not only Jewish — audiences. In 1945, it was a declaration to the world: the Jewish people are alive and will stay alive. “Freylekhs” was awarded the Stalin prize; it was hard to get tickets to it for several years.

Mikhoels, too, was awarded the Stalin prize. But, for some reason, Pulver, who wrote the music, was passed over, as was Emil May, who staged the dances with such talent and expression. They both contributed to the success of the production.

Rumor had it that Pulver's prize was thwarted by Dunayevsky,¹⁵ who told the committee that Pulver was making wide use of folk songs. How could anyone fail to see how brilliantly and creatively Pulver used that music and that it had so many new melodies in it?

But "Freylekhs" was staged before the war, before our evacuation from Moscow, and many events happened before it was produced, which twisted and broke down my life.

In the fall of 1939, the theater traveled to Leningrad for a month-long tour. I had to take Tolik with me. When we returned to Moscow, Boria did not meet us. When we came home, I found him in bed. In my absence, he had gone to Odessa to see his beloved uncle. The uncle was dying of cancer. Lying in bed, Boria said that he probably had the flu. But the doctor who came over the next day, Lev Kassil's¹⁶ aunt, a very good doctor and a nice person, told me quietly that he was seriously ill. She promptly sent him to the hospital, the First Clinic, in Pirogovka Street.

A professor whose name I do not recall told me his condition was very serious, that it was hopeless, and that, if he recovered, it would be entirely due to his youthful constitution. It was as if a heavy rock fell on me, or it would have been, if it were not for Boria's friends and co-workers in the newspaper. I would have hardly coped with that misfortune. They called and visited us in the hospital every day. They brought oranges and lemons from the agricultural exhibition which had just opened then. Those delicacies were not to be found anywhere else in the city.

Boria sat across the bed, gasping for air. This time, it was his heart reacting to the bad back, they said. He could not lie down. He was given all kinds of medications, injections, and ground raw liver. I was turning away so that he could not see my face, wondering how he was able to eat that. But apparently he realized that it was the only thing that could save him. And he ate lemons with no sugar without wincing; it was I who, standing beside him, shriveled with sadness, but he followed all of the doctor's orders.

And he survived. He checked out of the hospital, a first group invalid at 30 years old. Without the help and support of his colleagues, led by Boris Yakovlevich Kamensky, he would hardly have survived. I could not think straight, paralyzed by the new disaster.

Subsequently, I lived in constant worry for him, always afraid that even worse things were in store for us. I cannot recall but I think it was his newspaper that helped him get a voucher to the heart sanitarium Podlipki.

¹⁵ Isaak Dunayevsky, a prominent Soviet composer who enjoyed great popularity.

¹⁶ Lev Kassil, a very popular author of children's books.

After that there was no more talk of physical therapy; his heart was in jeopardy. Gradually, he resumed his work for the newspaper.

One day I noticed that Boria tossed and turned in bed at night, unable to find a position, to adjust to the pillow. I thought it was his back pain. But it occurred several nights in a row. He dodged my questions. Finally, he told me something he had no right to tell “under penalty of death”: one “fine” morning, when he left the house to go to work, he was approached by a man who asked him to get in the car and took him to an office which he still could not recall without horror and shuddering.

They started questioning him about Belenki, director of my theater studio, who gave lectures on philosophy, a writer who later published several books, including “What is Talmud?” and a book about Spinoza. He was married to my former fellow student, Elsa Moiseevna Bezverkhnyaya, my dear friend Elsha. We were close friends and often saw each other, had fun and good times together.

It was that Belenki that they questioned my husband about. He responded that he had nothing negative to say about him and would not make things up. One had to have great courage in those days to respond like that. They interrogated him a long time, and getting nothing, let him go, warning strictly not to tell anyone, even his wife, about that “visit.” I listened, shuddering. Just what we needed on top of all our troubles! But Boria made up his mind and warned Belenki to be careful, that he was in danger. They summoned Boria once more, without getting anything else out of him.

One day, after the war, he wrote to me – I was in a rest-house then – that “*the Malach amoves* (angel of death) came again” but he told him, “I am a sick man, leave me alone, I can be of no help to you.” And they did.

In the early summer of 1941, Boria was taking treatment and resting at the heart sanitarium Podlipki. I was with him there, too. Our dear little son was in a kindergarten in the country. On June 22, a war was announced. It seemed so unreal and far away to us there in Podlipki. But sitting in the garden in the evening, we heard the bombings and saw tracer bullets in the sky. We felt more and more alarmed each day and went back home.

The situation in the city was very alarming: offices and factories were being evacuated from Moscow; children were the first to be evacuated. We sent Tolechka, along with other children of theater workers, to Ples on the Volga. The bombings began in Moscow, too. At the sound of alarm, Boria and I went to the House of Journalists which had a bomb shelter; we lived nearby. But that trip, although short, was very hard for him and we stopped going there, staying at home.

Sometimes, in the evenings, Julietta¹⁷ or Iliusha Vaisfeld dropped by to see us.

Everyone tried to be optimistic, believing in the strength of our country and in Stalin – we still believed in him then! Boria was working in the “Communications Vestnik”. That job suited him well, particularly that he could work from home.

It was getting more and more alarming and dangerous to stay in the city. The theater was seized by confusion. I went to Ples to pick up my child. One had to take a train and then a boat on the Volga. I was filled with anxiety; Boria remained home alone. The trains and railway stations were packed with people. The train took me to Kashira; from there, a boat took me to Ples, to my little boy. At long last, I brought him home, having completely lost my voice from all the worrying and anxiety.

In the theater we were told to pack the necessities and bring them over. No one knew when the evacuation would take place. I had a couple of suitcases with clothes sent to the theater, pillows, blankets, and a basket with the essentials: some cereals, sugar and soap. A small suitcase with some food and a few suitcases with other stuff stayed at home. So, we sat there, waiting for a signal from the theater. One can easily imagine our state of mind.

Boria decided, just in case, to call his “Vestnik” and learned that the entire editorial board was leaving Moscow on October 15 by special train provided by the ministry of communications. He arranged for us to be on that train. In the evening of October 15, we called the theater and were told, “You can come if you like.”

We had our stuff loaded into a car; arriving at the theater, we found confused theater workers running around in a state of total panic. The theater’s general manager Belilovsky, Mikhoels and his family, Zuskin and his family, Belenki and his family had all fled, leaving the actors and other theater workers behind to fend for themselves. In a panic, we had our stuff loaded again and rushed to the railway station, leaving many things, including the basket with foodstuffs in the theater.

The weather matched our mood and the confusion reigning in the city: snow was falling in large wet flakes, swirling in the air, mixing with a drizzle. Masses of state bonds, like flocks of birds, were flying in the air, falling on the heads of people packing the Square of Three Stations to the bursting point. The driver helped us unload in a small place where he had managed to park his car.

Boria, Tolechka and I stood, pressed on all sides by an endless stream of the moving crowd; our situation was hopeless: any attempt to get to the station would be fatal for my sick husband and child.

¹⁷ Julietta – a friend of the family. Her daughter Natasha, five years my junior, is now in Canada; her twin brother Sergei, in New Zealand.

Suddenly, a truck appeared from nowhere next to us, with a Red Army soldier on it. I yelled, "Do you want to make a hundred rubles?" He answered, "Yes. I do!"

He jumped off the truck and, with Boria and my child in tow, carrying our suitcases, began to slowly make his way through the crowd towards the railway station. I stayed behind with many other suitcases, waiting for him to return. After a while the soldier came back for me.

I found my poor husband and my little son not far from the entrance to the waiting hall. Boria sat on the floor on some bundle and Tolechka was standing beside him. It was a heart-rending sight. I paid the soldier and he smiled thankfully. Looking around, I saw a few of our actors with a look of consternation on their faces. Boria and I had agreed with my friend actress Sirotina and her husband Lakhman to stick together in case of evacuation. I found them among the actors. Boria gave Lakhman the name of the head of the echelon and the number of the train which was to evacuate Vestnik's personnel.

Lakhman told him that he had been sent by their editor Boris Dranov and asked for permission to board. And permission was granted. Lakhman helped us carry our things to the platform where our echelon was; it was an electrical train. The situation on the platform was calmer and more organized.

We entered one of the cars which turned out to be empty. After catching our breath, we remembered that the pregnant Taiblina and her daughter were back at the station, and Lakhman again went to see the head of the train, deputy minister of communications, to request, on behalf of Boris Dranov, permission to accommodate the GOSET actors in our car. Boria could not move by himself. Although he had only started working in that magazine recently, he had already gained the staff's respect both as a journalist and as a person.

Lakhman gave Boria's name, and permission to board the actors was granted. Very soon our car was crowded and filled with voices of people hurrying to settle down. We were among "our own."

I am putting "our own" in quotes because the next day, when everyone had settled down, the leaders of our overcrowded car, in the person of merited actor and director Krol, with the participation of some distinguished actors, began to compile some lists (I don't know for what purpose), and I was told that I was not on the list.

I could only tell them

At a time like this, when our leaders have fled, when a terrible war is going on and the people are fleeing Moscow, you decide to get rid of me? You all stood abandoned and lost at the station and had it not been for my husband who got permission from the deputy minister for you to get out so easily, you all would have

remained at that station, lost and abandoned, for a long time. It was me who asked him to help you. He too feels hurt for me! But at a time like that, what scores are there to settle?

As it turned out, they were certain that the permission to board had been arranged by Lakhman. Now they had to add me on the list. But bitterness and hurt returned to my heart. A feeling of alienation and isolation came back, deeper than before.

That train dragged on very slowly. A couple of times there were some bombings, and everybody trembled with fear. The food supplies in our little suitcase were melting away. We gave some of the food to Sara Davidovna Rotbaum who had, in the confusion, left her food supplies and some of the necessities at home. Nobody was willing to help her. She had a lot of stuff with her, and we found some space for it next to us and supported her as much as we could. She had never been so close to Boria and admired him as a very interesting companion, the father of a wonderful boy and the head of a beautiful family.

Very soon, our food supplies were gone; at some waystation, during a long stop, Boria decided to take a slow walk to the station store and try to buy something. The station snack bar was filled with crab legs. He returned empty-handed. But we survived; we were young, and whatever we were able to get was given first to the child, to my Tolechka. Besides, the “leaders” of our car sometimes managed to get bread and some other stuff for everybody.

After many days of travel, we were all taken off the train in Kuybyshev (now, Samara) where we were supposed to change to a locomotive train bound for Tashkent. There, we met the theater leadership who had fled in panic: the general manager Belilovsky, Mikhoels, Zuskin and Belenki, with their families. We were friends with the Belenkis. Boria had shown a lot of courage, saving Moisey from persecution by the NKVD, but in a difficult moment he did not even call to tell us of the emergency evacuation, of their flight from Moscow, although we had kept in touch constantly.

My mother and Aniuta with a six-year-old Iva were already in Tashkent. They had evacuated from Odessa by boat and saw another boat, bombed by the Germans, sinking before their eyes, while attempts were made to save the survivors. We were happy to see our loved ones safe and sound. They lived in Paravoznaya Street in a room about fifteen square meters, with no amenities, which they rented from some local Russians, quite unpleasant people. With our arrival, the room became too close for comfort, but it did not diminish our happiness: we were together.

Boria started looking for a job right away and found one as the head of the foreign department of the “Pravda of the Orient” newspaper. We lived a long way from the city center, and Boria had a hard time commuting to work.

Tashkent was overcrowded by refuges from all the corners of the country, and the city transportation could not cope with it.

The Uzbeks, pushing everyone aside, stormed the tram cars, hanging in bunches off the steps. It took a lot of effort and time to get to work but Boria endured it stoically; my heart sank when I looked at him.

Very soon my theater was sent to Samarkand, and I had to go there with everybody else, taking Tolik along. They said it would not be for long. Boria stayed behind with my mom and sister.

Tolik and I lived in Samarkand, an ancient city, where the shabby and dilapidated buildings were next to the beautiful architectural monuments of the past. I remembered forever a rare temple with oriental ornaments, leaning a bit, threatening to collapse for many years. It made a stunning impression on me. We lived near that temple in squalid cells, two or three people in each.

We all looked like all refuges usually do in such awful conditions. Solomon Mikhailovich was doing all he could to have us return to Tashkent and obtain a permanent place for the theater. He looked like Menahem-Mendel whom he had played in “Man of the Air.”¹⁸

About three months later, we came back to Tashkent, and the theater moved into the old building of Tashkent Conservatory, which had an auditorium and a stage. If I am not mistaken, Leningrad Conservatory had worked there for a while, before moving to the new building of Tashkent Conservatory.

The Theater of the Revolution with my beloved Babanova was also in Tashkent, where many well-known actors and theater people gathered. Our theater set up a group which supplied us with foodstuffs. The group was led by Falik, director of Cherovtsi Philharmonic, Sidi Tal’s¹⁹ husband, who spoke a funny mix of Moldavian Yiddish and Russian. Soon after arriving in Tashkent he was arrested, but a few months later, thanks to Sidi Tal’s efforts and energy, he was released and started the work of distributing the meager foodstuffs his group was able to procure.

In addition, later we received coupons for bread and “zatirukha” dinners; it was a kind of soup for which we had to go very far and stand in long lines. It was mostly me who went to get those dinners; sometimes it was Aniuta, who later found a job as a secretary in a law office.

¹⁸ There is also a 1925 silent movie “Jewish Luck” (it was never shown in the Soviet Union in my lifetime), where Mikhoels plays the same Sholom-Aleikhem character. I saw it here.

¹⁹ Sidi Tal – an outstanding Yiddish actress from Moldavia.

Working there was attorney Gottlieb and his energetic cheerful wife who literally saved him from the hands of death. They turned out to be Boria's friends from Moscow. They became friends with Aniuta and were very fond of her.

Boria often wrote articles on international matters and worked successfully as the head of the newspaper's international department. But his illness progressed, and life in Tashkent during the war was having an adverse effect on his health. He started having pain in his heart again, to say nothing of his back. Fortunately, he was admitted to a clinic where a wonderful doctor, Professor Slonim, was working. He put my poor husband back on his feet, although that took a great deal of effort on his part. He was so mild-mannered, so caring, not looking like an important professor at all. He inspired trust and respect from the start.

The clinic was very far from where we lived, and I had a hard time getting there. The situation in it during the war was unimaginable. Boria was alone in a small gray room, gasping. In front of me, just before I left, Slonim gave him morphine, and Boria settled down and fell asleep blissfully before my eyes. The doctor's bedside manner and precise treatment gave us hope.

Boria did not like the clinic's food but loved the peaches I brought him. Those peaches were delicious and very good for the heart. (Nowhere else, neither in Sochi nor even in America, have I since come across such peaches, either in taste or in appearance.) Whatever little that I managed to bring Boria other than that, he also wolfed down eagerly. Gradually, his strength was getting restored; he was slowly coming around. To this day I recall Doctor Slonim with affection and gratitude.

After the hospital Boria was placed in a government sanitarium, a clinic of sorts, where everything was different: superb health care, excellent conditions, food and premises. I was happy for him. After the sanitarium Boria went back to work at "Pravda of the Orient" for a while, and then he was assigned to the post of deputy director of Uzbekistan TASS.

Soon thereafter he was named director of the TASS.²⁰ There was a good group of people working there whom Boria got along with very well. Talented journalists Tamara Kvitko, Ida Sirkina and Tsilia Moiseevna Fradkina²¹ were very experienced, and the work went well. Often, on Thursdays, there were meet-ups with interesting people. One day Boria invited Akhmatova²² and Ranevskaya²³ to one of those meet-ups.

²⁰ TASS, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union, - Soviet Central News Agency.

²¹ I knew all three.

²² A famous poet.

²³ A famous actress.

By that time, he was receiving a government food ration and got a two-room apartment in Transportnaya Street, where my mother, our Tolechka and I, as well as Aniuta and Iva “luxuriated.”

That apartment was much larger and more spacious and not far from the railway station. Life became easier for us. The family was large and of course it was hard to make ends meet but we had it much easier compared to many of the refugees. Boria was even invited to an Uzbekistan party conference and was writing yet another speech for the party boss Yusupov. (From that conference Boria brought us each a fresh bread roll with ham in it and was telling us how he had relished wolfing down the delicacies served there.)

His work at the TASS went on smoothly. Tamara Kvitko, slender, fragile, with huge feverishly shining dark eyes, was writing talented articles and essays and edited other authors’ materials without taking a cigarette out of her month, despite her bad thyroid gland and emotional distress over her sister whom she had lost during their evacuation from Odessa. Not having a corner of her own, she slept in Boria’s office. Later, back in Moscow, she worked for various newspapers like a packhorse, working harder than anybody else.

Ida Sirkina, her close friend, was also an excellent journalist and editor with many years of experience. Her fate was sad. After we had left Tashkent, Tamara became head of the TASS, with Ida as her deputy. Ida had started a love affair with an author, well-known in Uzbekistan, and soon gave birth to a girl. Everything would have been all right if it had been a son.

But he already had two girls with his first wife, and the affair was soon over. Ida turned out to be a wonderful mother, and that girl was her only consolation. Later, she came to Moscow and successfully defended her thesis on Louis Aragon²⁴ at the Literary Institute. A few years later she died unexpectedly, orphaning her daughter. Tamara took interest in the girl’s fate but soon lost sight of her. (Tamara herself passed away in 1976.)

Tsilia Moiseevna Fradkina, also a journalist, was part of the TASS editorial staff as well. She lived with her husband and their two daughters and stoically endured all the hardships of the war years. She and her husband were old Bolsheviks. Having been in close touch with her, I can say that she was a pure crystal of a human being, highly ideological, a member of that old cohort of communists that was later almost totally eliminated.

²⁴ Louis Aragon – a French poet and novelist, one of the leading voices of the French surrealist movement, a long-time member of the French Communist Party.

Suffice it to say that as an old party member she received a government food ration, and when she got yet another ration at work, gave it up, believing it unethical to receive two rations at a time like that. After the war she and her family moved to Vilnius. Sometimes she would come to Moscow on business. She was writing a book about Dzerzhinsky²⁵ and met with his wife. Then her husband died. Tsilia became ill and moved in with her daughters in Leningrad where she soon passed away.

I write about these wonderful people, our friends, beautiful, honest people, always ready to help a friend. They are very dear to me.

My situation in the theater was getting even worse. Because of the reduction in subsidies Solomon Mikhailovich had to move a few actresses from my group to a different category, the “supporting staff.” For example, Sarochka Fabrikant was classified as Mikhoels’ secretary, and I as a “dispatcher.” There was something very humiliating about that title; Mikhoels knew how to hurt my feelings! Appearing, as before, in crowd scenes and classified as “dispatcher” on paper only, I felt put down. But I tried not to show my hurt, not wanting to reveal how hard it was for me to take it. I was almost never assigned to participate in the performances. Soon thereafter, Mikhoels and Fefer, the poet, left for America to raise funds for the Soviet Union.

Then a rumor started that the theater was about to return to Moscow. The theater’s pending departure created a problem for my family. I realized that Boria liked his position at TASS, an interesting job among good people; besides, he had earned a name and some standing in the city. He thought I might work at a local theater with actors who had arrived from other cities. But it was quite unthinkable for me. I longed to return to Moscow, to our room in Nikitski Boulevard (for which he had been sending rent.)

Besides, that climate, that heat, were both bad for his health; during those years he was twice in the hospital in critical condition. I tried not to insist, realizing how hard it was for him to part with a job he loved. He had his doubts too and did not insist. We decided that he would remain in Tashkent while I, along with Aniuta, Iva and Tolechka would go back to Moscow with the theater, and my mother and his friends at the office would be taking care of him.

Aniuta and Iva would share our Moscow room with me and Tolik until he returned and then move in with Sarochka Fabrikant, who had agreed to share with them her tiny den in Stoleshnikov Alley where many of our young and not-so-young actors lived. I did not quite like that decision, but I decided not to object, hoping to find a better solution for Aniuta in Moscow.

²⁵ Felix Dzerzhinsky, an early Bolshevik revolutionary and official, head of the first state-security organizations, the Cheka and the OGPU. Established Soviet secret police. One of the architects of post-revolutionary Red Terror.

We traveled for several days, and finally arrived, straight to the theater! Actor Zhabotinsky helped us carry our belongings to our apartment in Suvorosky Boulevard near the Nikitski Gate. (He had always helped us load and unload our stuff, thereby earning some money to support his wife and child. He was a good actor and a quiet, humble man.)

Finally, we were home. But there was a family from Leningrad living in our room: a man and his wife, a famous Leningrad tailor, and a son, about ten years old. All our books were in the dust on top of a bookcase, piled up to the ceiling, replaced in the bookcase by a lot of crystal and other ‘luxuries.’ The woman was an ethnic Russian, her husband was Jewish, fond of drinking and women. Our “nice” neighbors seemed to be fond of them and met us with apprehension. We felt quite uncomfortable and squeezed in.

Aniuta immediately got a job as a typist in my theater, hired by the new manager, Fitman, who had known her in Odessa. Iva went to school; she was already 8. I saw that my little boy secretly brooded, envying her. By that time, he could read and write beautifully. In the kindergarten in Tashkent he had often been surrounded by children for whom he recited fairy tales. Here, in Moscow, he was left without his friend Iva and felt lonely. Perhaps, if I had hustled a bit at the school, they would have accepted him a year early, and the problem would have been solved. It only occurred to me later — in hindsight, as always!

I had to drag him with me to shop, to go to the market, standing in long lines. The child, though very obedient and gentle, could not stand still for too long, and I was very worried when he would run away. From time to time, Aniuta stopped by for lunch, but for the most part she ate at a nearby canteen, getting lunch coupons from the management office. And that family from Leningrad still lived with us, waiting for an apartment.

We wrote letters to Boria in Tashkent and even talked on the phone with him. Boria said to Tolik, “Promise me to behave well,” to which Tolik replied, “I can’t promise but I’ll try.” Boria and I were delighted with his answer. He was still quite little, not even seven yet.

One day, actor Traktovenko told me that my friend, a BelGOSET actress, was to pass through Moscow and that I could go to see her at the railway station. He knew that Rivochka Gurevich was a dear friend; she had finished our studio and her graduation play, “The Oppenheim Family,” based on Feuchtwanger’s novel, where she shined in the lead role, had made a big impression on me and everyone who saw it. Her life at the GOSET did not pan out; she was considered to have no talent and was given no parts. That, of course, struck a chord in my heart, and I felt for her. I too was unhappy at the theater.

The day before, Tolechka, taking a walk on the boulevard, had met a boy dressed in rags, and asked if he could play with him. I could see he was somewhat embarrassed by the boy's appearance. I said that he was a nice boy and they could play together. (To myself, I thought that the boy was most likely a street urchin, and my little son might get carried away playing and forget everything.) But I left him with that boy and Iva, then eight, in the boulevard, telling them both, strictly, not to leave the boulevard, saying that I would be back soon.

I rushed to the railway station to see Rivochka Gurevich to express my sympathy; her pain was my pain too. On my way there, I felt worried about having left my little boy without proper supervision and got off at Smolenskaya Station, deciding to go back home. Next to the station I stopped to stand in line to buy some rotten potatoes and then hurried back home. A terrible, irreparable misfortune had happened in my absence: my boy was run over by a motor vehicle!

I started calling all the hospitals and, having reached the Sklifasofsky, learned that my Tolechka was dead. As I was told later, that boy and my son had run across the street where a car was parked by the sidewalk, a dream of boys of all ages in those days, and they were examining and touching that car. Suddenly, that boy called out to Tolik from the boulevard. My boy darted towards him and a truck, turning from around the corner, ran him over. Later, at the militia station, they made all kinds of excuses for the driver, concealing the details.

In short, I am to blame for my son's death and carry this guilt with me to this day. During all these years, many misfortunes have befallen me, and I always blame myself, saying, "Don't complain, it is all your fault, you are clumsy, awkward and silly." It is hard to forget the charming, affectionate little boy with his expressive glittering eyes.

I will never forget how he, together with other children, was at a rest-home near Tashkent. I came to visit and found him still looking thin and pale. To my question, why he did not sleep during the "nap hour," he replied, "I lie there with my eyes closed and tell myself fairy tales. You know how much fun it is to make up stuff." I was delighted by his answer. And when I said, "You haven't put on any weight; you are not eating well; you don't like it here?" he said, "I miss home." Adding, "No, that's not right, I do not miss home, I miss you." Those words pierced my heart for life. How could a six-year-old express himself like that?

In those days, I seldom heard kind words addressed to me. Lately, Boria's illness made him more and more nervous and irritable. Hot climate, the daily commute in an overcrowded bus and the hard work, though mentally satisfying, were not making him any healthier. His illness made itself known more and more. Whom could he take out his pain and irritation on, if not me? No matter what my excuses, I was always to blame.

Once, during one of such scenes in Tashkent, Tolik, clinging to me, said in a low voice a few short words (I can't remember them exactly) to the effect that he disapproved of his father. Boria asked him to say it louder and was taken aback. He did not expect such a reaction and reflected on it. And the quarrel stopped, that time.

And now, having returned to my beloved Moscow, I lost my boy forever. It was like parting with my heart and soul. Only then did I realize how much he meant to me, how deeply he took hold of my whole being, how much charm and charisma that boy had — he was radiant; his expressive eyes left no one indifferent. That blow broke me, tore me apart. I blamed myself alone for what had happened, and even now, so many years later, I still carry my guilt with me, always.

Now, whenever a new calamity or trouble befalls me, I tell myself, “Don't complain, don't whine, you are nothing, you could not keep your child safe, keep him from such a terrible death. There is no forgiveness for you.” A deep wound has remained in my heart.

Soon I went to Tashkent to pick up Boria, broken, carrying a heavy burden in my heart. He was at a sanitarium-like clinic again. It was terrible to look at him. How could anyone break the awful news to such a sick person, a loving father like him; it would kill him. I visited him every day. Smiling, I told him about our son, and Boria was happy, getting ready to see him again. Tamara and Ida knew everything. On the way to Moscow he made all sorts of plans for the future, getting ready to meet with his darling son. At the station, we were met by Elsha and her husband who told him his son had died of meningitis. (We had agreed on that story beforehand.)

Boria took this news, this terrible blow, stoically. He did not even torment me too much with his questions. There was no talk any more about him getting a job and commuting there daily. He worked at home, editing materials I brought him from TASS and other editorial boards; later he got a job as an editor with the “Soviet Sport” publishing house, preparing articles and books for publication. I was his liaison with the publisher, bringing various materials for final edits and reviews.

As before, he was well respected and valued as a journalist. I was always met by the staff very warmly and cordially; the people there were likable. Our friends — Iliusha Vaisfeld, Julietta and Dorochka, to say nothing of Elsha and Belenki — surrounded us with such attention and caring. Tamara Kvitko, Ida Sirkina and Tsilia Moiseevna often called and wrote to us from Tashkent; everyone was trying to ease our grief.

Soon we learned that I was pregnant, and our friends' attention redoubled. Boria often felt very ill and found himself in the hospital every now and then. He was treated by Professor Vinogradov whom we sometimes asked to come for a home visit, each costing us 300 rubles.

I recall one day when Boria felt very bad; he had developed a terrible cough which did not stop day or night, on top of his other problems. It seemed that his heart would burst with strain. Vinogradov used all the means he had but his efforts were in vain, nothing helped. So, one day, after a physical examination, he asked me to step outside the room to discuss the situation. The “discussion” lasted five minutes, and he prescribed some cough medication. I quickly bought it at a pharmacy.

And a miracle happened! Those five minutes saved the day. Boria must have worried a great deal during our secret “conference.” (The doctor said nothing significant.) But by evening the cough was almost gone from simple ephedrine which he did not even have to take for long. We realized that Vinogradov had used that “conference” as a psychological ploy. But soon we could not afford 300 rubles for each visit and, on Vinogradov’s recommendation, we invited his assistant, also a very good doctor.

But let me go back to the time when Sasha, our hope and consolation, was about to be born.

Our friends became even more attentive and helped us with all the chores associated with the upcoming birth. Elsha was the most helpful of all; it is hard to overestimate everything she did for us. Our friends were always by our side during that time, and in the evenings, an interesting, cheerful company gathered in our room. One night, on July 11, 1945, as I sat at the table with everyone else, I felt a strange, inexplicable condition and thought, “Can it be the beginning?” I decided to sit it out, to wait, and only said to Boria, in a low voice, that I might be mistaken. But he decided to send me to the maternity ward right away, accompanied by Elsha and Julietta. I was certain his panic was unwarranted. But, strangely enough, they kept me in the hospital and, after some procedures, put me in a pre-natal room where a few women were waiting to give birth.

Lying in bed, I heard the groans and cries of the women in labor. There was a woman with a huge belly sitting not far from me, tossing and turning with pain. I watched all that and, during my own contractions, grabbed the headboard and whispered, “Help, help,” trying not to scream. Suddenly, I said almost calmly, “Come here, I am giving birth.” The woman with the belly crossed herself. They had no time to take me to the operating room; I gave birth right there, in the bed. It was so easy. A red creature appeared, screaming at the top of its lungs, with eyes about to pop out of its head. The nurse said, “A boy!” And I screamed, “A boy, a boy!” and started asking to call my husband to tell him about that joy.

Soon I went home, and a life full of daily worries began. I was taking care of my two boys, the sick Boria and the newly born bundle (1 kg 900 g.) For four months I breast-fed him; then I did not have enough milk and had to run to the clinic for more milk, which they often ran out of.

Gradually, we started giving the baby other food; the boy began to put on weight and looked better. It was not easy to take him out for a walk. The boulevard was close by, across from the building, but taking the crib down from the fourth floor was quite a task.

One day, Boria went downstairs with us; he needed fresh air too. I left the two of them on the boulevard and rushed back home to cook some food for them and clean up a bit. But soon I heard Boria's voice and Sasha crying loudly. I dashed down the stairs and was horrified. Boria, sick, hunched forward, was barely able to hold the baby in his arms. It was a terrible sight; the baby was screaming so the entire street could hear him. With difficulty, we climbed back up the stairs to the fourth floor.

Soon we decided to exchange our 22-meter room and our anti-Semitic neighbors for any other room. After a long search, we found a place on the other side of the boulevard, on the second floor of a five-story building. The room had a balcony. Boria could breath fresh air, sitting on the balcony, and so could Sasha. He was almost a year old. A couple of months later, when we finally placed our meager furniture in a new 17-meter room, we celebrated Sasha's birthday. Many guests came over; it was all very joyful; we had a lot of fun.

But very soon we realized what we had gotten ourselves into. Shortly before we moved in, a fellow with wife and son had moved into the other two rooms. The young couple was very quarrelsome. The father and son fought a lot. The father, taciturn and glum, was fond of horse races and spent all his scant money there. He did not talk to his son. That was their business. They had had an apartment consisting of two adjoining rooms and exchanged it for two separate rooms in the same communal apartment where we now lived.

From the start, these neighbors were very hostile to us; that united them. When bills for gas and electric arrived, we paid our share, leaving the money in the kitchen. They pocketed that money. The common facilities were very dirty, and I often had to clean up for everybody, to avoid arguments. Soon, the man divorced and married some old maid; the situation became even worse, she often quarreled with him over the races, and fought with his former wife and son constantly, about everything. The atmosphere was unpleasant; I had to navigate carefully to avoid confrontations. We were saved by the summers when we went to the country.

I had one bit of luck: I found a housekeeper, a wonderful, diligent young woman, Masha. She was 25. She was fond of our little son and was very devoted to us. She became part of the family. Soon she learned to cook, easing my life quite a bit: I often had to go to rehearsals and performances. Fortunately, the theater was nearby.

I recall Boria, sick and lying in bed, taking his last post-graduate examination at the university. Two professors came over to our place to examine him. Having prepared everything for their arrival, I rushed to the theater for a performance. He passed the examination with flying colors.

Later on, Boria was accepted in the Academy of Social Sciences, and I often took him there to attend lectures. Slowly, with long intervals, he was writing a thesis which he was to defend in the Academy's law department. He was a strong-willed man, of course; he worked on his dissertation, fighting his illness. Ossification of the spine it was called—constant pain, crippling him and bending him down so that he could not straighten his back. And his heart—arrhythmia, heart attacks. More and more often, he was in the hospital in a serious condition. Those hospitalizations interrupted his work on the dissertation. There was no talking about it anymore. I did not push him, seeing what effort it took to continue his work.

But, with his attention off that work, he focused on me again and made wild, ugly scenes. No matter how I tried to defend myself, nothing helped. All his accusations were the result of his torment, and I was unable to calm him down. Very rarely, in his good moments, he would admit, "I am biting the hand that feeds me." But those moments were fleeting, and then it was repeated all over again. Those ugly scenes took place in front of the little Sasha and Masha, who worried and felt for us deeply.

Those absurd, senseless scenes exhausted me, to say nothing of Boria. I often thought that his work on the dissertation would take less of his energy, less strength than those ugly, baseless quarrels. But he could not help it. I was the only person that he could take his constant pain and frustration out on. In those moments I felt humiliated and had a hard time pulling myself together. But I forgot my grudges quickly. That helped me to survive and take care of him and the family.

I recall how one day, having put Sasha to bed after yet another scene, I also went to bed, reliving the unfair accusations, and cried silently, not to wake him up. And I heard my boy crying too. That was in 1952, when we lived in a new, separate, two-bedroom apartment already, in Levitan Street. It was the only time when my little son showed empathy for me. Later, as he grew older, that never happened again; on the contrary, his father must have influenced him in many ways. But I am getting ahead of myself again.

The defense of the thesis went on swimmingly. Boria did not let me attend that event, and I stood behind the door, worrying for him. I was torn by anxiety: I wanted so much to see him like he had been — strong, handsome, healthy. I prayed for him, wishing him success; he deserved it. The subject of his thesis was "The Black Sea Straits – The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles."

The committee, consisting of leading experts in the field, was unanimous in awarding him the title of Candidate of Science (PhD) in international law.

A celebration was held at our house: oh, joyous days! Yet, I constantly worried: how would that strain, that effort, that feat that he had so heroically accomplished and survived, affect his health? I felt limitless joy and anxiety at the same time. Our friends were ecstatic too. We had many of them, all very interesting people. Our evenings were passed in discussions and conversations, and Boria was always the most interesting person among them all.

Soon after the defense, he had to go to the hospital in Pirogovka again. After staying there for some time, he decided that he was well enough and could return home.

Soon he announced that he had an appointment at Moszhilotdel, the City Housing Department. He had, a while before, written a letter to N.S. Khrushchev, then first secretary of the Moscow Party Committee, requesting a separate apartment. He wrote that he was a very sick man engaged in scientific work, that the four of us shared a 17-meter room in a communal apartment, with neighbors who made life very difficult. Of course, this is a primitive retelling of his letter which was much more expressive and interesting.

Khrushchev was not yet the party leader; Stalin was still alive. But from 1949 on, he was the city's boss, involved in the development of new districts of Moscow. Boria knew that his letter had been received. Every morning at 9 a.m. he called Khrushchev's office. Of course, he was talking to one of the deputies, who gave him some hope and politely asked him to wait. And Boria kept waiting and calling almost every morning. I trembled with fear that it all would end badly. But, right after he came home from the hospital, he was given an appointment at the Moszhilotdel.

Again, I worried about him. It was hard to watch him climb the steep stairs to the third floor of that building. He stopped at every step. My heart was sinking with anxiety; he had just checked out of the hospital; he did not complete his treatment. I prayed that everything would end well.

We expected to find many visitors at Moszhilotdel's office but there was no one; soon we were called by the head of the office. The first question he asked Boria was, "What floor do you want?" What joy! What happiness! We were given a brand new, two-room apartment near the Sokol metro station! No more communal living.

All the way back home, I was trying to persuade Boria to lie down upon return, to catch his breath and recover from that visit. He did lie down but sat up right away and, grabbing the telephone, began to call our friends, telling them, in every detail, about our joy.

My entreaties were of no avail and, giving up, I rushed to the store to buy Sasha something warm for the winter and shop for some food for Boria's birthday, 28 October.

The next morning, sending Sasha and Masha out for a walk, I started cooking breakfast for Boria. He got out of bed to go to the bathroom and fell down on the bed with a contorted face. His mouth shifted to the right, almost to his ear. Right away, I summoned a doctor from a very good clinic that Boria had recently been assigned to. The doctor's diagnosis: a stroke, with paralysis of the left side.

Boria tried to speak but I could not understand a word. His left arm and leg were absolutely paralyzed. A lady doctor did her best to help, to bring him back to his condition before the stroke at least. He obeyed every order and instruction and it helped. On the tenth day, his left leg moved slightly, and we began hoping for an improvement. We breathed a little easier.

Later, it was time for him to go to the hospital again, and we managed, with great difficulty, to get him in. He could move his leg a little, but his left arm would not move at all, and his twisted mouth could barely pronounce some disjointed words. After a long stay at the hospital, he felt a little better but his arm remained motionless. Fortunately, it was his left arm. He used his right hand to lift his left hand and place it on the table to press down on a piece of paper to write me a few words, an instruction or request. Gradually, his condition improved but his left hand's movement remained limited for the rest of his life.

Later, when he started working at the international department of the Foreign Literature Publishers — he continued to edit and write essays on international law — he would use his right hand to place his left on the desk to press down the pages. Among other works he edited were four volumes of Charles Hyde, an American author²⁶, and Boria wrote articles and reviews about Hyde's works.

The publishing house was in the suburbs, and I had to take the metro, then a suburban train and then walk for a long time on foot, carrying heavy volumes and manuscripts. But who other than me could do that? I would have done anything to keep things quiet and calm at home, not to waste my last energy on worthless, petty stuff.

He was slowly getting better, and we were discussing plans to move to the new apartment.

²⁶ Charles Hyde, a U.S. authority on international law, an early advocate of vesting all military power in an international security organization. Professor of international law and diplomacy at Columbia University (1925-45), member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague. My father edited and commented on his seminal publication, *International Law, as Interpreted and Applied by the United States* (1945). I kept those four volumes for a long time.

Then he was given a voucher for a sanitarium-type rest-home in Peredelkino. I often visited him there and, having visited the new apartment, had to describe it to him in minute detail over and over again. I was worried about the fact that the apartment and its two balconies faced the railway. I was afraid that the noise and clanging of the freight trains would interfere with his sleep and his work. But he replied joyfully that he liked it all and was quite happy.

At last, the day came when I packed our belongings and scanty furniture and took Sashenka to Levitan Street (later renamed Panfilov Street) near Sokol, to the third floor of an eight-story building. It was a first-rate apartment: two separate rooms with high ceilings; one room was 22 square meters and had a balcony running its whole width, the other was about 12 meters. Both rooms opened into a cozy, rather spacious hallway which led into a small corridor with a bathroom and a separate restroom. On top of all that, there was an excellent kitchen with another balcony. The kitchen had an attic, and the little corridor had a closet with a garbage chute in it. And of course, hot running water in the bathroom and kitchen. What else could one dream of? We were so happy.

Boria was at Peredelkino at the time, and I was able to accomplish the move relatively easily. I even managed to buy a wonderful German kitchen cupboard, very beautiful and not too expensive, but it stood in the middle of the kitchen; the only wall it could stand against was taken up by a heating radiator. The apartment had many snags and defects in the workmanship, and I had to keep going to the chief of the construction office, which was quite annoying. Over time, I bought Boria a handsome massive desk and a beautiful bookcase for our large library.

There was a lot of hassle and running around but the most unpleasant thing was the absence of power in the entire building. The elevator was not working. We were lucky that the apartment was on the third floor.

Here is what happened one fine day, if you can believe it. I was about to go somewhere. We did not have a lock on the front door yet, and it was ajar. Suddenly, there was noise outside the door and a man's voice said, "This door is unlocked, let's go in here!" The door opened and I saw a group of men filling the entire stairway landing. A few very important-looking men stood in front, all wearing the same astrakhan cake-shaped hats, and among them stood N.S. Khrushchev! "Can it be Khrushchev?" I thought and immediately dismissed that idea. "How silly you are. Khrushchev walking around visiting apartments, especially yours." He had looked quite different on the grandstand, and I thought, "It must be chief of construction or something."

They entered, and the man I had taken for Khrushchev asked how we felt settling in. As we spoke, I realized that it was indeed Khrushchev in the flesh but decided not to back down, not to apologize, and to continue talking to him as if he were chief of construction. That made it easier.

Plucking up courage, I went on the offensive: it was such a wonderful apartment but without power. And we were spoiling all that beauty and magnificence with our kerosene lamps.

At once, a short Jewish man stood up next to me, saying in a low voice: “That is Mosenergo (Moscow power grid)’s regulations.” Khrushchev came forward: “Well, dear lady, show us what defects there are in the apartment.” Getting bolder, I took him and his entourage in their astrakhan hats to the kitchen, where my beautiful cupboard stood, blocking the way. “Was this thing here or did you buy it?” asked Khrushchev. Proudly, I said, “Of course I bought it but there is nowhere to put it. The only wall it could properly be placed against is taken up by the radiator.”

The same short Jewish man said in a low voice, “Where would you like to have it put?” I pointed to a space next to the balcony where vertical pipes ran from the ceiling down through the floor. The Jewish man said quietly, “No, that’s impossible.” Khrushchev overheard it. Pushing everyone aside, he cried, “How so? Why can’t that radiator be put over here?” and stuck his finger into the opposite wall, next to the stove, where there clearly was no room for it.

Then I led them to the bathroom where a large rusty hole graced the bathtub mounted into the wall. I said that I would have had it fixed myself but did not know who to turn to. Khrushchev went red in the face. “Where is chief engineer?” he yelled. A tall man, his face white as paper, his eyes unblinking, appeared before him. “Shall I have you prosecuted or give you time to start working properly?!” Khrushchev thundered. In a trembling voice, the chief engineer mumbled, “Please give me time.”

My seven-year-old Sasha followed us all that time. In the kitchen, Khrushchev suddenly turned to him. “Well, how do you like it here?” To which my son, sticking his finger in the wall, said, “Well, this... this is cardboard!”²⁷ I froze: how will it all end for us? Khrushchev sniggered and patted my boy on the shoulder. He then asked me to continue, and I led the way into the larger room, showing him the ceiling, which was wavy and uneven. Khrushchev started yelling again. I decided it was probably enough with the defects; I was not sure if I would get away with it.

Following me back into the hallway, Khrushchev asked me about my husband, and I said he had once worked with comrade Khrushchev in some district committee or other. The man did not bat an eyelid. About to depart, he said, “Well dear lady, I think you will feel good here, you’ll like it.” Turning to Sasha, he suddenly asked, “Well, what do you want to be when you grow up?” To which Sasha blurted out, “I want to be a drummer.” Everybody laughed and moved toward the door.

²⁷ I remember this episode. The drab wall paint made it look like cardboard. What did I know?

On the landing, approaching the last man in the long procession flowing down the stairs, I asked in a low voice, “Who is that comrade?” The man in an astrakhan hat looked at me as if I was insane and said, “That is Khrushchev.” A mute scene followed.

That day the entire team was given a dressing down, lasting well into the evening. And the name Dranov was repeated many times – as I learned from the same quiet little Jewish fellow whom I saw in the backyard a couple of days later. “What have you done?” he said, reproach in his voice. The day after Khrushchev’s visit, people started coming in, fixing the defects. It took them half an hour to move the radiator to the spot I had indicated, and my cupboard was installed where I wanted it.

Never in my life did I have it so easy. Everything was done to my liking: the bathtub was replaced by a new one, the ceiling straightened out, new parquet floor was installed, and many, many other things were fixed. I wrote a thank-you note to Khrushchev, saying that he had prolonged my sick husband’s life, that we were happy, that my husband would now be able to continue his work in beautiful conditions. And my seven-year old added a line too: “I’ve changed my mind! I want to be a builder.”

Later, when I called Khrushchev’s office, his deputy told me that our letter had been received and made everybody laugh. I often took Sasha to see Boria in Peredelkino and every time told him this story, adding new details.

At last, the day arrived when Boria arrived in the new apartment from the sanitarium. It was a joyful, exciting day. I felt overjoyed looking at him. So much energy and nerves had been spent to get to that day and now, what bliss, what happiness could be seen in his face, what comfort. Happy days followed. Every day workers kept coming in, fixing remaining little things.

Soon my seven-year-old Sasha went to the first grade. The school was nearby. I accompanied him. He held onto my hand, looking at everything, surprise and wonder in his eyes. With his class, we went up the stairs to the second floor; the parents were not allowed further, and he mistakenly walked into someone else’s classroom. He ran back to me, lost and upset. A teacher had to get him into the right classroom. That was a happy day too. He was going to study, but he could already read and write well.

A more or less peaceful life began: Boria was editing manuscripts which I brought him from the Foreign Literature publishers. Yet it was not quite peaceful. My dear husband was a highly educated person, knowledgeable in his field, a Ph.D. in international law, which he had earned by his heroic effort. But it took great willpower for him to sit at the desk and continue his work after a bad night, when pain in the back would not let him sleep. Constant worry tore me apart, yet my heart told me that his work was less difficult and harmful for him than the ugly scenes he was constantly making.

Apparently, he needed that diversion, needed to take his constant pain out on someone. I understood that, but it did not make my life any easier. My situation in those moments was very humiliating. One day, in a rage, he even struck me with his cane, leaving a large bruise on my leg that stayed there a long time. My mother who was visiting me at the time sat in the kitchen, crying. Tamara Kvitko, with whom we had started a friendship back in Tashkent, could not tolerate one such scene. She stood up for me, and Boria kicked her out.

What was I to do? I forgave him everything. Could I have left him, sick and helpless? I understood that he was unable to control himself and his pain; his diseases were too many and too hard to bear. It was unfair for one man to endure so much adversity.

One evening, angry at me over something, he went downstairs without a jacket, wearing slippers. The elevator was not working; it was windy, snowing and raining. He stood outside the entrance doorway, complaining loudly about his no-good wife, crying for help. I ran back and forth, begging him to come home. I brought him a warm coat, trying to calm him down, but nothing worked and, giving up, I returned home, thinking that he would not be able to stay out for too long and would have to come back. Indeed, that is what happened. He came back soon.

It was quiet in the house for a while. But the consequences came around before long: I had, with great difficulty, managed to get him into the Botkin Hospital in a very grave, critical condition. There were no vacant beds in the hospital rooms and many patients lay on narrow cots in the corridors. Even Boris Pasternak was placed there, his wife relieved from time to time by a woman who took care of him. I stayed by Boria's side for 41 days, taking occasional naps at night, nestling by his feet. I spent many sleepless nights there. No one kicked me out, and I was on nurse duty day and night, caring for him. Soon, he was moved into a room with one other patient in it. Professor Votchel, a very good doctor, treated him.

The doctors said that he survived thanks to me. I do not believe so; it was the doctor who did all he could to put Boria back on his feet. Perhaps the fact that I was always by his side and followed the doctor's orders to the letter had a calming effect and helped him. Masha, always reliable, stayed at home; she loved Sasha and was a really kind-hearted, empathetic person.

The doctors and nurses treated me warmly. Most important, Boria was recovering. He was feeling better and I was able to break away for a short while to go home to my child and buy something tasty and nourishing for Boria.

Finally, we returned home. I could not believe that miracle. True, Boria did not protest during that time, taking all his medications, tests and injections patiently.

He had got used to all that long ago; now he knew it was his last chance to stay alive and followed the doctor's orders faithfully.

True, he was always treated by good doctors, but coming home from the hospital previously he used to get nervous over everything, every little trifle. But this time around, peace came to our house, and I was happy. Many friends started visiting us again; those were the best hours of our life. The conversations and arguments concerned various subjects, and Boria was still the most interesting conversationalist! Needless to say, I prepared for those meetings, trying to treat our friends to the best food I could get, which was not at all easy in those days.

There was a lot of talk about Stalin in our circle. Boria had figured out the "great leader" many years before. Thinking about my poor husband now, I recall him as a 17-year-old idealist, believing in the shining future and the victory of communism. He came to the Soviet Union in 1926 with his aunt and uncle from China, having refused to go to America with his mother. All his unbearable life, all the hardships and suffering that befell him, were a great injustice towards that remarkable, talented, brilliant man.

He could not straighten his back, could not turn his head. I washed him, shaved him, did everything I could, but the disease bent him over and limited his movements more and more. Three heart attacks, two strokes, left-sided paralysis. He was near death 22 times. Too much for one man!

I got it in the neck too. The evacuation to Tashkent, the return home, a trip back to Tashkent to pick up Boria after Tolik's death, and our subsequent life, full of adversity. The only joy I had was obtaining that new apartment.

I described all that above in these notes but... the cruel fate of my dear husband is still very much on my mind! We moved into the new apartment in 1952. Boria arrived from Peredelkino and was quite pleased and quiet. That happy time lasted quite a while, until the quarrels resumed, leading to his hospitalization at the Botkin. Before it happened, it seemed that luck had finally come our way; we started living in normal conditions, in a wonderful new apartment, and were financially secure. Boria kept working at the international law department of the Foreign Literature publishing house. He needed to be cautious, save his energy, be careful about his every move, but he could not control himself, forgetting about his condition and continued to bring his pain and anger down on me.

Sometimes, those scenes took place in front of Sasha and, as he grew older, he began to copy some of his father's antics. One day, doing his homework, Sasha would not sit still, fidgeting and playing pranks. He was about eight.

Passing by, Boria took a look at his exercise book and, seeing an ink stain on the page, struck Sasha with his cane. I only gave a stifled scream, saying under my breath, “What example are you setting. He will act like that when he grows up.” It turned out to be a prophesy.

Three years passed, and 1956 came about. It was Spring, time to go the country. I found a dacha in Krestovo,²⁸ in a very picturesque place. We rented half a house there; the other half was occupied by a Russian family with two kids. Those people were very nice, and we became friends with them.

Tamara Kvitko spent one month of her vacation with us. Guests came over on Sasha’s birthday. Even Aniuta, my dear little sister, having come from Chetnovtsi, with her Ukrainian Drama Theater on a Moscow tour, was with us that day at our dacha.

A few days later, she was going back home, and Boria did not permit me to see her off! I disobeyed, deciding that it would not be fair to Aniuta and that I would return soon. After reaching Moscow by train I took a train back and returned to the dacha. Boria said, “Why did you come back? You should have seen her off.”

Summer was drawing to a close, and it was time to go home. Boria was not feeling well: his mouth twisted again, and we were afraid of another stroke. He slept badly, the sedative did not help, and it was risky to take it, so I gave him pyramidon instead and he slept well. In the evening, before going to bed, he would make a usual scene, and I trembled, afraid that the neighbors behind the wall would hear. I kept trying to defend myself, with no effect. Later on, the neighbors told me that they had heard everything, deciding that I was a mean person and a bad wife.

Every day Boria kept insisting that we return home, and we decided that I would take him home first, and then Sasha and I would return together with our neighbors — they had booked a truck.

To take Boria home, I ran around for several days, looking for a car. At long last, our neighbors found one, and I took Boria home in that car, leaving Sasha in the care of the neighbors.

I spent two days at home and made arrangements with a very nice woman to care for Boria. (He had helped her to get an apartment, and she was happy to do something for him in return.) I called a professor from the Litfond²⁹ clinic, who had treated him before, to come to see him, and then went to the dacha to pick up Sasha and our belongings.

²⁸ Mom does not mention Malakhovka for some reason. That is where we spent almost every summer, as I recall.

²⁹ Litfond – a support agency for writers, providing them with various services, including medical care.

When we returned home, Boria had nothing but praise for that woman but said that the doctor had been surprised that I had left him. Again, I felt guilty. But what could I have done? Boria had been unwilling to wait two or three days to go back home together with us. He was not feeling well and needed to go to the hospital as soon as possible.

I insisted on the Botkin where he had been treated so well and put back on his feet before, but Boria wished to go to a nearby hospital and would not change his mind. He must be thinking of making it easier for me, I thought. I took him there. But the hospital staff treated him with indifference. They sentenced him to death right away!

A doctor and a professor who came to see him once or twice a week sat on the couch across from his room and talked, doing nothing to help him. I stood at his door, looking at them pleadingly but they remained indifferent. I called all our friends, asking them to talk to these doctors, with no success. The nurses neglected him, and I even quarreled with them; one, taking pity on me, gave Boria an injection. He sat hunched on his bed, gasping, and apparently realized that nothing was being done to help him.

Pushing me aside, he screamed, “Uncle! It hurts! Uncle! It hurts!” How hard was it for me to hear it. He was addressing his uncle who had raised him. That scream of despair, was of course, addressed to me. I was paralyzed by the doctors’ inaction; a wall of indifference surrounded us.

He was soon moved from a common room to a more private one, where there was only one other patient — a hopeless one, I was told. Boria continued to sit across the bed, his mouth open, wheezing. I placed his swollen legs on a chair to make it a bit easier for him. That was how we spent the night.

The next morning, a Jewish doctor on duty stopped by. In answer to my pleading gaze, he only raised his arms helplessly. He allowed the nurse to give the patient some warm tea. It did not help. A few minutes later my Boria, uttering a short scream, collapsed on the pillows, his eyes still, yellow. It was the end. A terrible end!

I cannot forget it. That death will remain with me as an eternal rebuke, reminding me what a good-for-nothing loser I am.

As I left the hospital, I told the woman doctor that my husband was 48 (his birthday was three weeks later, in October) and that he had a Ph.D in law, to which she said, “Why didn’t you tell me that before?!” She should have been put on trial for those words. And me too. She added that the hopeless patient in Boria’s room would most likely be discharged. She had condemned my husband to death from the get-go.

So, I live with this terrible guilt that I did not do everything to save my husband. That I did not do enough for my mother. That I was so wrong to have left my dear son Tolechka on the boulevard with a boy I did not know.

Can I forgive myself for all that? Especially now, when I live alone and feel very lonely. I look at the photos of my loved ones, put fresh flowers next to them. I feel pain and sadness, and I constantly blame myself for their deaths.

Afterword

My mother's memoirs end with my father's death in September 1956, when I was 11. I think that before he died, my dad witnessed the XXth party congress and the first revelations about Stalin's "personality cult." The party bosses replaced one another at the helm until Khrushchev came out on top. A few years later, with the advent of the "thaw," the ice began to thaw towards surviving Yiddish actors of the GOSET as well. Those of them who could still move about were allowed to establish a traveling Yiddish Ensemble under the leadership of a remarkable actor, Shwartser. That troupe, consisting of the GOSET veterans and a few young people who unexpectedly joined them (Polina Ainbinder and Yakov Yavno, among others), had no permanent place of their own; the GOSET's building had been occupied by the Malaya Bronnaya Theater since the 1950s.

The Ensemble put on old GOSET plays: Goldfaden's "The Witch," Sholem Aleichem's "200,000" and "Tevye the Milkman," Gordin's "Across the Ocean," "The Bewitched Tailor," "Three Little Raisins," and some others. As before the revolution, the troupe toured cities and towns in Russia, Ukraine and the Baltics, traveling in trains and buses and performing wherever possible — philharmonic halls, "houses of culture," clubs, and the like.

Local authorities were often inhospitable, even hostile. Sometimes, in Kyiv and elsewhere where Jews were treated less than warmly, the actors found pre-booked stages closed to them; the troupe would then be sent to some village or a kolkhoz where oftentimes there was no Jewish audience at all: the unheated auditoriums were filled with kolkhozniks shivering with cold. Those people did not understand Yiddish, of course, but as mom told me, they would give the performance quite a warm welcome. Poor actors! Poor people! They were ready to applaud art they did not understand.

In many towns with Jewish populations, however, especially after emigration to Israel began, which led to the rise of Jewish consciousness, a performance by the Yiddish Ensemble turned out to be quite a significant event of local life; the auditoriums were packed with young people who came with parents who translated Yiddish into Russian for them; after a funny line the audience's laughter often rolled in two waves.

Those audiences, in Donetsk, Kishinev, Riga, Vilnius, Odessa, and many other cities, gave the Yiddish Ensemble an enthusiastic welcome.

Between tours, the troupe rehearsed in Moscow, usually in some basements or other similarly unsuitable places. Their performances in Moscow and Leningrad were extremely rare. But I did attend a couple of them in Moscow in the 1970s. I recall the unusual, uplifting atmosphere in the theater. After one such performance, my friend Mark Zilberquit, now a well-known Moscow publisher, gave me a rare, fragile book he had found somewhere, titled “The Life of a Yiddish Actor,” published in 1938, which had many old photos, including that of my grandfather, Nathan Dranov. I was struck by the resemblance.

I recall further, how, in about 1974, at Shwartser’s anniversary celebration in the VTO,³⁰ actors and writers were congratulating him and suddenly my mother also rose to speak. She talked about the fate of the Yiddish theater. “It was hard for us before the revolution. But it is not much better now. We are still wandering,” she said. And she went on to talk about the death of the GOSET and the continuing hardships of its, now elderly, veterans having to endure an itinerant life.

I sat in the packed auditorium, watching her in fear. “What is she saying?” I thought, a chill running down my spine. Those were the not-so-liberal 1970s. “It will not end well!” But my mom got away with it.

Many pages in my mom’s memoirs are devoted to my father, Boris. Like her, he was an “actors’ child.” His father, Nathan Dranov, a Yiddish actor, quite famous before the revolution, and his wife Nadina (Nadia) Dranova both hailed from Warsaw. Mom’s story about the suitcase filled with stones instead of props and the golden pocket watch with the initials N.D. is one of the family legends I had heard since childhood.

According to another family story, after Nathan died in Harbin, (I do not know the exact year, but some records show it was about 1922), Nadina decided to go to America. She had only enough money for two tickets to San Francisco or one to New York. The family council decided that she would go by herself, leaving Boris in the care of his uncle and aunt, the Kuschinskis, also well-known Yiddish actors at the time, and later, after settling down in New York, come back for him. In New York, she was accepted in a Yiddish troupe led by the famous Adler: they knew her and Nathan. That was, I estimate, in about 1924.

They say that one of Nadina’s brothers, emigrating to America some years later, saw her name on the playbill and came over to the dressing room during the play to give her flowers. That is how they first saw each other after some 20 years.

³⁰ All-Russia Theatrical Society.

Nadina came to the Soviet Union twice, first in 1928 or 1929, and then again, if I am not mistaken, in the 1930s. Both times she met with her son, trying to persuade him to go to America with her. He refused. The first time, having returned to Odessa with his aunt and uncle, he refused for ideological reasons; he had become a Komsomolets, an idealistic young communist, joining the party in 1929. There, in Odessa, he met my mother in 1925 or 1926. The second time he refused for a different reason — he was very ill and/or might have been afraid to apply for a visa in those years. I do not know if I would have been born if my dad had gone with his mother to America in the 1920s.

I have always been interested in the fate of my grandmother Nadina who emigrated to the States. I tried to find her. It turned out I was too late; she died somewhere in New York in 1976. The place of her burial is unknown.

I remember my father well, although I was only 11 when he died. Hunched over by his illness but cheerful, witty and entertaining when his friends came to visit — Iliusha and Lina Vaisfeld, a writer; Moisey and Elsha Belenki; Milia Vilensky, a historian; Julietta Romeovna Batistini, a journalist who worked in the state “Gypsy Theatre”; Ida Sirkina; Tamara Kvitko — all those people my mother recalls so warmly. Those were wonderful gatherings indeed. I watched and enjoyed them very much.

I do remember the ugly scenes my mother talks about, but they did not leave a lasting memory; apparently, unpleasant things get easily forgotten in an otherwise happy childhood. I remember other things: for example, how my father helped different people, including those who, having been “rehabilitated,” returned from exile and the Gulag in the 1950s, such as Lidia Veniaminovna Milkhiker, my first English teacher.

My dad died in 1956 of heart disease. I believe they would have been able to save him here in America. Or would they have?

It remains for me to add that my other grandfather, Abram Kurtz, a Yiddish actor in Warsaw, whom my mother recalls so fondly, died in Treblinka during the German occupation. And my other grandmother, Balbina, whom mom talks so much about in her memoirs, was determined to emigrate with us, but she died one year before we left for America. She passed away in our apartment in Moscow at the age of 88.

Mother’s sister Aniuta emigrated to the United States too and died in 1988 here in New Jersey. Her daughter Iva, my cousin, now 84, lives in New Jersey. Nina Sirotina, Sonia Binik, Grisha Traktovenko, my mom’s fellow actors from Mikhoels’ theater and the Moscow Yiddish Ensemble, all passed away in New York in the 1980s and 1990s.

Today, of all the actors of Mikhoels theater, only three survivors remain: Ethel Kovenskaya in Israel, Mania Kotliarova in Moscow, and my mom's close friend Elsha Bezverkhnyaya, wife of Moisey Belenki. She is 93 and lives in Israel. Her son Solomon lives in New York. We are friends.³¹

As I said earlier, my mother's memoirs, containing so much private, personal, bitter and subjective memories, were clearly not meant for publication. But it seems to me that the personality and life of that remarkable, talented, self-effacing woman and everything she lived through in "the best country in the world" is of interest not only to those who knew her. You be the judge of that.

³¹ This Afterword was written originally in 2003. All these people have since passed away. I saw Elsha in a nursing home in Israel in 2007; she still looked great and we had a wonderful time. "Do you know that I was present at your birth?" she said. Both Solomon and Elsha passed away a few years ago, too.