

Irina Soboleva-Ginsburg

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Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Ella Orlikova

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We met with Irina Soboleva-Ginsburg at the Hesed in Lvov. She is a nice elderly lady. She took us to her house near the Opera Theater in the central part of Lvov. We went upstairs to the 4th floor and entered her apartment, which is nicely furnished. There are many works by Irina Soboleva-Ginsburg, her daughter and granddaughter on the walls. There are new works in one corner: portraits. She is full of ideas and hopes to find a sponsor to publish her next series of paintings.

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My family background

My father Benjamin Ginsburg was born in the small town of Rogachev in 1897. This town is located on the bank of the Dnepr River in the Jewish Pale of Settlement [1](#) in the south of Belarus. The majority of the population was Jewish.

My grandfather, Lazar Ginsburg was born in the 1860s in Rogachev. There was a well-known Ginsburg family in Russia in the 19th and 20th century that had played a significant role in the economy of Russia before the Revolution of 1917, but I don't know whether my grandfather was related to that family. He was a merchant of Guild I [3](#). He obtained a permit to live in Moscow and moved there at the beginning of the 20th century. My grandfather was a religious man. He was very conservative and ignored novelties such as telephone and electricity. He observed all Jewish traditions and religious laws. He attended the central synagogue in Moscow and made his contributions there. He always wore a yarmulka and had a thick, neatly combed beard. My grandfather studied at the cheder in Rogachev. He was smart and witty, and could solve the most intricate problems. He was a very honest and decent man. He was a man of his word. My grandfather died in Moscow at the end of 1916. I don't know what he died of.



His wife, Maria Ginsburg, was born in Rogachev in 1873. She cooked kosher food and had a kitchen maid – a woman from Rogachev. They cleaned their apartment before Sabbath and lit candles. They got challah from the synagogue. My grandmother and grandfather spoke Yiddish. My grandmother Maria wasn't fanatically religious, but she always obeyed her husband and followed the rules that he had set up. They rented a big apartment in Moscow. They had seven big rooms that were nicely furnished. My grandfather had kerosene lamps, silver candle stands and a huge desk in his study. The desk was covered with a green tablecloth. He kept all his accounting files in it. My grandfather didn't accept any new developments but he understood the importance of education and gave his two children, my father Benjamin Ginsburg and his sister Bertha, a very good education.

Bertha was born in 1900 and had private teachers, who taught her foreign languages and gave her piano lessons. She was an intelligent woman, raised in luxury. It was hard for her to get adjusted to changes in life. In the 1920s she graduated from the Moscow Polytechnic Institute. Bertha married a Jewish man. They weren't religious, but they celebrated Jewish holidays out of habit. I didn't like her husband and tried to avoid communication with him. They had a very talented son, Valery. He became a candidate for technical sciences and later a professor. Bertha didn't work for a long time. Only when it became necessary did she learn Italian and worked as a translator and interpreter at the Moscow Polytechnic Institute. She specialized in technical translations. Bertha died in Moscow in the 1960s. I have no information about her son.

My father studied at a private Jewish grammar school, where children got general education and studied the basics of Jewish religion, history and traditions. He received a very expensive and good education there. Besides, there were teachers coming home to teach him and Bertha Russian, English, German and French. After grammar school my father graduated from the Institute of Commerce. He was very good at his studies. Then the Revolution of 1917 came. My father lost all family property and was confused about what to do.

After the Revolution Bertha and her mother stayed in one room of their apartment and my father got another room. The other rooms were given to other tenants. I only saw my grandmother Maria a few times. She was a very nice old woman. She got along well with all the other tenants in this big communal apartment [4](#). She had a strong Jewish accent. She was very poor after the Revolution, but she took all disastrous events in her life very stoically. My grandmother stayed in Moscow during the war, and Bertha and her family evacuated to Kuibyshev. My grandmother starved to death in 1943. Her neighbors buried her in the Jewish cemetery.

My grandmother on my mother's side, Enta Antokolskaya, was born to the Antokolsky family in 1872. She was very proud to stem from the Antokolsky family. They emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. There is a town called Antokol near Vilno. Her family's name originated from this town and the Antokolka River, and her Jewish ancestors got their family name from the names of this area. Some of her Antokolsky relatives received very good education back in the 19th century, and some were craftsmen. One of the most remarkable men was the sculptor Mark Antokolsky [1843-1902]. He created many monuments and always remembered his Jewish roots. My grandmother was his niece. An outstanding Soviet poet, Pavel Antokolsky [1896-1978], was my grandmother's nephew.

My grandmother came from a poor branch of this family. Her father was a craftsman, a leather specialist, and had nothing but the pride of his famous family name. My grandmother got some basic education at home. She was taught to read and write in Yiddish in order to pray and do the housekeeping. She was very talented and learned Russian, she spoke it with no accent and read many classics. She married a craftsman, Movshe-Girsh Meyer Begam, born in Vilno in 1870, who was working in her father's shop. I have no information about my grandfather's family. My grandparents observed Jewish traditions, went to the synagogue and spoke Yiddish in their family. I cannot say how seriously they believed in God, but on the outside they made things look alright.

In 1906 my grandmother's cousin Antokolsky, a lawyer living in Moscow, invited my grandmother and her family to move to Moscow. He had a residence permit to live in Moscow and could obtain one for them. My grandparents and their family settled down in Losinustrovskoy, in the southwestern part of Moscow. They rented a wooden house. These were not the best conditions, but it was an opportunity to get out of the Pale of Settlement and give their children good education. Living in Moscow changed my grandparents' way of life. My grandfather put his prayer book, tallit and the other accessories of Jewish religious observance to the bottom of his box and never took them out again. They spoke Russian to each other, their surrounding and their children and learned very soon to speak it without an accent. My grandfather liked reading newspapers and was interested in all the latest developments.

My grandmother was a housewife and very fond of reading. Later, when they moved to the center of Moscow she often went to the theater and movies. My grandmother had many cousins in Moscow. We didn't socialize much, and I knew very little about them. My grandfather was a fur dresser and ran other various errands. He ran all kinds of errands for Antokolsky, the lawyer who helped them move to Moscow. After the Revolution of 1917 my grandfather became a vendor. He sold toffees. He lost his faith in God under the influence of his life in Moscow as well as scientific and technical progress. He constantly told us that there was no God from a scientific point of view. He left a will to give his body to a dissection room so it could be of 'use to mankind'. It was an unusual and brave act for his time. My grandfather died of cancer in 1934. Of course, his will was not fulfilled. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Moscow, but without a Jewish ritual.

My mother was born in the town of Vilno in 1895. Vilno had a Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish and Russian population. The Jews of the town were craftsmen, tailors, and shoemakers. Jewish streets formed a kind of ghetto. There were small stores and shops on the ground floors of the houses. My mother was the oldest sibling. She had a younger sister – my favorite aunt Maria, born in Vilno in 1897, and a brother, Lev Begam, born in Vilno in 1903. He was a bridge construction engineer. He moved about the country a lot, building bridges on the Volga, Don or Amur Rivers. I hardly knew his family. Maria was an actress in the Jewish and Polish theater for some time. She married a producer – a Jew called Grigory Cherepover. Later he changed his last name to Griper. He worked at the Jewish theater in Kiev for some time. Before the war he had a job with the Moscow cinema studio. I know that a famous Jewish writer Isaac Babel [5](#) was his friend. They were planning to make a film called *The Wondering Stars*, based on a book by Sholem Aleichem [6](#). Babel came to their house to discuss their plans. Some time later, in the 1930s, my aunt was summoned to the KGB office where she was told to report on every word that Babel and Grigory were saying. They told her, 'Babel visits you. You are a Soviet patriot and you must listen to what they talk about and report to authorities on every word you've heard'. My aunt Maria was shocked. There were two officers in the office.

One of them went out and then the other whispered to my aunt that she might refuse. When the first one came back she said that she couldn't do it. She became hysterical and they told her to go.

In 1939 Babel was arrested. Maria's husband was a talented man, but he began to drink. My aunt divorced him. She graduated from the Institute of Libraries and worked at the Historical Library in Moscow for many years. Her son grew up a selfish man; and my aunt committed suicide at the end of her life. He treated her awfully while she had dedicated her whole life to him. He was a photographer in the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. They got a beautiful apartment in the suburbs of Moscow. I visited aunt Maria several times. She was so happy to see me. Shortly after my last visit her son Alik sent me a telegram, which read, 'My mother fell asleep like a little bird'. She took soporifics. She was terribly lonely. Alik is in Israel now, and we don't keep in touch with him.

My mother studied in a Russian private grammar school for girls in Moscow. After finishing it she got a diploma of Teacher of History and Geography. She was a pretty girl and always had a number of admirers. She had her first romance when her family was living in Losinustrovskoye. They had a tenant, a poor student, who fell in love with my mother. He proposed to her, but my mother's father said, 'Are you out of your mind? Do you really want to marry this hobo?' This poor young man happened to be Marc Chagall [7](#). But then they took different roads. My mother's family moved to another neighborhood, and Chagall left the country soon afterwards. 40 years later he met my mother in Gorky Street and took her to his shop. They talked for a long time, recalling the time when they were young.

My father met my mother in 1916, when he was very young. They got married in 1919. They didn't have a wedding. This was the beginning of the Civil War [8](#), there was a famine in Moscow and a wedding was just out of the question. My parents registered their marriage at the registry department. My mother married my father upon his insistence. They didn't have a wedding party. It was a hard time and my parents were far from religious. They had a civil ceremony and my grandmother cooked dinner for close relatives. Theirs was a marriage of convenience. He was the son of a millionaire and supposed to be rich. But after the Revolution they lost all their property, and my father was treated with contempt in my mother's family. My father was always neatly dressed and well educated, but he couldn't get adjusted to reality. He couldn't find a job, and he didn't do anything in the house. Other members of the family called him 'duffer'.

Growing up

I was born on 2nd November 1920. My mother didn't love my father and this attitude reflected on me. Two years after I was born my father left us. My grandparents' patience snapped because of my father's incapability. My grandmother bought a rooster for chicken broth. My father was told to slaughter it. He ran after the rooster in the whole apartment, but couldn't catch it. He was told to leave. My father returned to his mother, and my mother remarried soon. Later my mother had a number of admirers. My mother tried quite a few roles in life, but her most suitable one was that of being a pretty woman. She enjoyed plenty of love. My mother's second husband, Abram Kutner, was a totally different man. He was a Jew from Odessa and once upon a time he was in the gang of Mishka Yaponchik. [Isaac Babel described this gang in his Stories from Odessa, where Yaponchik appeared under the name of Benia Krik.] During the Civil War quite a few members of the gang joined the Red Army. My mother met Abram Kutner in 1923 when he was chief of all military offices

in the Central House of the Red Army in Moscow. He had a big belly, always wore his military trousers at home and shaved his head. He believed that he didn't have to continue his education and had reached everything he wanted in life. While his comrades, Red Army commanders, studied at military colleges and academies, my mother's husband kept changing positions and jobs.

Their son Juli was born in 1925. My mother adored him. I was a miserable and abandoned child. My grandmother Enta and my aunt Maria loved me. They took care of me. We lived in a big apartment in Miasnitskaya Street in the center of Moscow. There was a dark yard near the house. The poet Aseyev [9](#), who lived on the 9th floor of our house, described the yard saying, 'the yard looked like an aquarium with no water in it and some children puttering about at the bottom'. My grandfather and grandmother shared their room with me. Maria lived in another room. My mother and her family lived in this same apartment but it was like they were living in a different one. My father visited me. My father and mother were not on talking terms with each other, but my father had discussions and played chess with my stepfather. Our neighbors called my father a gentleman. He was a true Angloman, very reserved, witty and very well educated. He had polished manners. At that time he had a job as a translator at a scientific institute. He translated scientific articles from scientific journals.

My stepfather didn't stay long at the same job. Some time later he was transferred to Alma-Ata where he became chief of the Red Army House. My mother and Juli followed him. Later he became director of a Soviet farm somewhere in Middle East. This was at the time when there were anti-Soviet gangs of basmaches in this area. [Basmaches were members of a Muslim anti Soviet movement in Central Asia; the Red Army put an end to this resistance in 1933.] Once they set the house where my stepfather and mother were staying on fire. They escaped. They traveled all over Russia. Lack of education played a wicked joke on my stepfather. He began to get lower positions. He became chief accountant, then accountant and ended up as a logistics manager. My stepfather treated me like his own child, was generous and always tried to give me good food and clothes. He gave presents to Juli and me. He was a kind man, although he used to be a bandit and lacked education.

My mother divorced him because he had many affairs. They lived together ten or twelve years until my mother had another affair. I kept good relationships with Abram Kutner. He married a quiet Jewish woman before the war, and they had a son. He volunteered to the Territorial Army in 1941 when he was over 50. He was wounded and returned home. During hard times he always helped us. I have a note from him in which he wrote, 'Irina, I'm leaving you some money. This is all I have at the moment. I'll give you more when I get a chance'. My stepfather died in Moscow in 1976. Even as an old man he worked at a construction company. My mother's next husband, Vassia, was Ukrainian and had a Ukrainian last name. He was a young actor and 25 years younger than my mother. They had a civil marriage.

We spoke Russian at home. We didn't observe any Jewish traditions and didn't celebrate holidays. We didn't go to the synagogue. We were very poor. We didn't follow the kashrut. It was impossible to get any kosher food in Moscow at that time. Besides, we couldn't afford any. There was an expression 'LCD' [eat what you get] at that time. My grandmother made delicious Polish borscht. Sometimes my grandmother got a herring. It was too small for our big family. My grandmother cut it into smaller pieces and added whatever else she had in the house. This dish was called forshmak. My grandmother made fish very rarely – it was incredible luxury for us. My father tried to

support us, but what he could do was little; he earned very little. Of course, he couldn't be enthusiastic about the Soviet regime considering that it had destroyed his life, but he was a reserved man and never expressed his attitude. Once in 1929 my father took me to visit his acquaintances. I put on my best shirt and skirt and we went there. When we arrived there I was struck by the grandeur of their dwelling. One of the mistresses of the house came and said to me: 'Irina, you must feel awkward in your poor outfit. You can borrow one of my daughter Lialia's dresses.' I stiffened. They gave me a silk dress adorned with roses. This was the first time I realized that there are rich and poor people.

My aunt Maria was the first to notice that I was good at painting. She took me by the hand and brought me to an art school. I was ten years old, and I was admitted to this school. I made good progress there and soon went to the Art College.

I also studied at the Russian secondary school until 1935. I don't know whether there were any Jewish schools in Moscow at that time. I remember some Jewish teachers in our school. One of them was Semyon Gurevich, a very ugly man. He noticed that I wrote nice poems. I wrote about Soviet labor and about Lenin. I can still remember one of my patriotic poems: 'Pishno znamia nad gornami. Silen vzmah. Trah! Vo ves' duh. Uh! Tut po vsiudu i vseгда slishna muzika truda' or 'Spi llich v svoey mogile. Mi tebia liubili i stroitelstvo razvili v nashey krasnoy storone'. [Translation: 'Bright flames over horns. Strong flap. Trach! Full tilt. Ouch! There is music of labor everywhere and always', or 'Sleep, Illich, in your grave. We loved you and stated construction in our red country'.] I was four when Lenin died in 1924, but we were raised as his followers at school. At home nobody ever discussed the subject of Soviet leaders.

We were also raised as atheists at school. There was a lovely 17th century church near my school that was pulled down during the construction of a metro station. At Easter we had to stand on the road facing this church shouting, 'There is no God!' We found it funny. We were all pioneers, and our teachers and tutors involved us in these kinds of activities. I was shy at school. Once my classmate, an arrogant girl, asked me, 'Irina, what profession would you like to choose?' I said, 'Artist'. And she said, 'No, artists are different'. My classmates didn't believe that I would have enough character to become someone. I became a Komsomol [10](#) member when I entered Art College. But it was just a formal membership – I wasn't involved in any activities.

I enjoyed studying at the Art College much more than school. I met new friends and we had many common interests. I still lived with my grandmother. My mother and her friend Vassia lived separately. Later Juli, my brother, came to live with us. He went to the same school as I did and studied well.

I met Andrei Sobolev at the Art College. He was born to a family of workers in Kologriv, in Kostroma region, Russia, in 1914. We liked each other, although our friends thought we were very different. There was no love between us and no love affair. We liked one another, but everybody else saw how different we were. His friends used to say, 'Ira is a nice girl and we have nothing against her, but a dove and a crow are no match'. Andrei told me what they said but he took no notice of it. We saw each other out of boredom sometimes. We met and went to art exhibitions or to the cinema. He took me home and we perhaps kissed a few times, that's all. We were just friends. In 1939 Andrei was recruited to the army. He had no family in Moscow, and I kept his company before he went to the army. We made no promises. From there he wrote me letters and I wrote back.

During the War

We didn't discuss political matters or the possibility of war, but everybody felt that the war was close. On 22 June 1941, Molotov [11](#) spoke about the war on the radio. My mother and her friend Vassia evacuated. I stayed in Moscow. Later in 1942 Vassia left my mother for another woman. In November 1941 Moscow was under the threat of German occupation. People were in panic and tried to leave Moscow at the first opportunity. Aunt Maria obtained a permit from the film studio to evacuate. I remember all of us, aunt Maria, her son Alik, my grandmother and I trying to get into an overcrowded railcar. We had our most valuable things with us such as books and family valuables: gold jewelry, silver tableware, antiques and pictures of famous artists. But there was no room for us and our luggage. The producer Michael Romm was responsible for evacuation. He threw out a few pieces of luggage so that we could fit in. Romm stayed in Moscow. We shared a berth with his wife Elena Kuzmina, an actress. She was a taciturn woman. Within about a month the train reached Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan in Middle Asia [3,500 km from Kiev].

My brother Juli was in the army. He added a couple of years to be recruited to the army. He was in the Territorial Army that was to defend Moscow. My father Benjamin Ginsburg also volunteered to the Territorial Army. He took part in the battles in the vicinity of Rzhev in late autumn. It was cold and muddy, the soldiers were freezing. My father had his nose frostbitten. He was captured by the Germans. We didn't have any information about our father throughout the war.

There was a Shota Rustaveli Art College in Ashgabat where I could continue my studies. I had some qualification already, and I was offered to teach graphics in this college. I had a bread card for 400 grams of bread. It also occurred to me that I could make my own contribution to the struggle against the fascists by developing the idea of the 'Windows' [posters with propaganda verses and pictures issued by artists during the Civil War and displayed in shop windows]. I called my invention The TASS Windows [TASS: Telegraph Agency of the USSR]. I issued 40 windows before other local and evacuated artists joined me in this activity. We were paid for this work. Our posters inspired passersby and people with optimism.

My grandmother, Enta Antokolskaya, lived with Maria and her son Alik in Ashgabat. Alik fell ill with typhoid. My grandmother made every effort to cure him and gave him all her food. My grandmother starved to death and died of pellagra in 1942. We buried her in the cemetery in Ashgabat.

We ate unripe tomatoes. Potatoes were as small as peas, so we didn't peel them, which was the usual thing at the time. The local population sympathized with those that were in evacuation in the town. They didn't segregate people according to their nationality. They had never seen Jews before. I believe anti-Semitism arrived there along with the evacuated Russians. Once my mother and I were at the market. She asked me what was necessary to join the Union of Artists. I started explaining and we began this short discussion. Some drunk military commented, 'Here, these zhydy [kikes] are discussing the ways of joining the Party!'.

All this time I kept writing letters to my friend Andrei Sobolev. He served his mandatory term of two years before the war and then was in the army for another five years. We got closer to each other through our letters. He was eager to become an artist. When he was in the army he was offered to become a professional military, an officer, but he refused. During the war he was a communications specialist. Sometimes he was sitting on a tree and made sketches of the enemy's

disposition.

In 1944 we decided it was time to return to Moscow. Aunt Maria was the first to go. She managed to get her room in our apartment back. She had paid her monthly fee and kept all receipts. My grandmother died, and I didn't get my room back.

My mother decided to stay in Ashgabat. She had a good job as an editor at the town radio station. My mother had a brilliant grasp of Russian. She also wrote articles that were published at the Aeroflot newspaper. She was about 50 years old and her passionate love affairs were over.

I returned to Moscow and stayed with my aunt Maria for some time when her son Alik served in the army. I entered the Moscow Art Institute in 1944 and got a chance to move to the hostel for art workers. I shared a room with 18 other girls: circus acrobats, singers and artists. There were two tables in the room, where other girls were putting on their lipstick, there were dirty plates on the tables, and I was working. I made linoleum engravings. In winter there was black water between the planks and lots of mosquitoes. Boys came to circus girls through the windows. Singers sang, and ballerinas danced leaning against the beds. The floor was shuttering, but I kept painting. God knows how I managed to study.

One day when I was on a visit at my aunt Maria's, the door opened and a lean and thin body in a torn overcoat came in. I looked and ran to him exclaiming, 'Andrei!' We kissed. He knew my aunt's address and had come to her hoping to get information about me. This was the only place he knew in Moscow. I was very happy to see him. That same night he suggested that we should live together. We had such a happy life together. I thank God for sending me such a wonderful friend. We got officially married four years later. All this time I lived in the hostel for girls and he lived in the hostel for boys. Andrei entered the Institute for Applied Arts.

After the War

My father returned in the fall of 1945. The salute of victory already thundered when he showed up. It was a great surprise. We didn't know whether he was alive. He also came to my aunt Maria. There was no other place he could go to. He was dressed in rags, all lice ridden, wearing only one shoe. We burnt all his clothes and got some new ones from our acquaintances. He didn't have a place to live. Some other people were living in his room. My father told us that he and his comrades, old people that didn't even have rifles, had been captured by the Germans in the fall of 1941 in the vicinity of Rzhev. He was transferred from one camp to another. He had a very good knowledge of German, and this helped him a little. He was an interpreter for some time and always tried to help people translate things in their favor. He was caught at this and sent to a different camp. He was circumcised, but people didn't report him to the Germans. He told me that his last camp was an underground facility, where the Germans were developing a secret weapon. He told me the name, but I don't remember. Apparently the prisoners worked there like slaves. My father told me that the only thing he was afraid of was to see me among the women that were brought to the camp. In 1945 the Germans decided to exterminate all the prisoners and mixed flour with broken glass. They were going to feed all prisoners with the food made from this flour. My father said that he touched this flour with glass. The English armies stopped the train shipping this mixture. The English liberated all prisoners. My father returned to Moscow and lived with his sister Bertha for some time. Later he managed to get his room back and married a woman that he had known since they were young. She was a common Jewish woman. I don't feel like talking about her.

We weren't friends with her.

My father met Andrei, and I asked him if he liked him. He said, 'Well, I believe, it's temporary'. He also thought that we were very different to be together. Our marriage lasted until Andrei died, though. Andrei was a very shy man. When we lived in different hostels he used to pick me up and we went to a canteen to have a meal. We could only afford spring onions for the money we had. We also received soap that we changed for bread. I fell ill with dysentery. Andrei sold his ration of bread to buy me a bottle of kefir. I asked my father to let us live in his room for the time being. I felt very ill and at least needed the comfort of a home. He refused. I thought that it was the influence of his new wife. I went hysterical and had a terrible row with him. I didn't know for a long time that he was in the Gulag [12](#).

My father was arrested in 1947. He was accused of being a German spy and sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment. He was sent to wood cutting facilities in the Gulag, but he was so old and worn out that the only work he could do was keeping records. He survived in the camp. He had a number on his arm that was the same as the number of the main character in Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's [13](#) novel, One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. In the 1960s my father read this novel and was surprised because of the similarities. My father wrote to Solzhenitsyn and Solzhenitsyn visited him in the late 1960s. They spent a few days together recalling the horrors of what they had to go through. Solzhenitsyn told my father that he liked his letter. There was no nagging in his letter. There is a whole paragraph about my father in his book, The Gulag Archipelago. My father spent six years in the Gulag. He returned in 1954. When I found out where he was I sent him parcels and warm clothes.

In my hostel there were actresses of the Jewish theater in the room next-door. Some of them were my friends. They often invited Andrei and me to the theater. We didn't understand Yiddish, but we attended all their performances. I was especially impressed by the King Lear performance with the striking acting of Mikhoels [13](#). He was a great actor. I remember what tragedy it was to all of us when he was shot in 1948. We didn't know any details but we understood that he had been removed. We knew that terrible things were happening in the country. For the first time in my life I felt uncomfortable about my family name – Ginsburg. Andrei and I went to the registry office to register our marriage. I took my husband's last name Sobolev.

In 1948 I graduated from the institute with the highest grade and was admitted to the Union of Artists. Andrei had one more year to study at the institute. I couldn't find a job in Moscow.

My mother lived in Ashgabat until 1948. She had a good job and was successful. Then this bad earthquake happened causing the death of thousands of people. She hid under her bed and survived. She had six ribs and her leg fractured. The town was destroyed. All survivors were taken to the central square. The earthquake happened at night. It was too hot and people were in bed without any clothes. My mother was taken to hospital in the town of Mary. One day she was told that she had visitors. She didn't know who it could be. The door to her ward opened and she saw a group of people bringing lots of food. They happened to be Jews from Bukhara, a town in Middle Asia, over 3,000 km from Moscow. There was a big and strong Jewish community there. They came to the hospital and asked whether there were Jews among the patients. The doctors pointed at my mother. This was their first and last visit.

When my mother was able to walk again she received a pair of slippers, a dress and a towel. She came to Moscow wearing this dress and pair of slippers. At that time we were renting a corner in the room from an actress in Pushkin Square in Moscow. I was pregnant. My mother couldn't obtain a permit for residence in Moscow because there were too many refugees in the city, thus she went to Riga. She wrote a letter to the highest officials in Riga explaining her situation and asking for an apartment. She received an apartment in the center of Riga. The only discomfort of this apartment was that it faced the wall of the adjoining building and was very dark. It was a communal apartment and there were two other tenants – two Lithuanian women. They didn't talk with us and I couldn't understand the reason until I guessed that it was because my mother moved into the room of a woman that had been deported by the Soviet authorities. And these women looked at all Russians, including us, as their enemies.

Andrei and I moved to my mother in Riga. I didn't have a job in Moscow and we didn't have a place to live. We decided to move there on a temporary basis. I didn't want to stay in Riga forever. I never liked Riga. We lived from hand-to-mouth there. Our daughter Anna was born in Riga in 1949. Anna was a very thin and weak baby, and we were afraid that she would not survive. I breastfed her for eleven months. By that time Andrei graduated from the institute and got a job assignment in Lvov. We didn't know anything about this town. I fell in love with Lvov the first time I saw it. It has beautiful architecture. Andrei's job was at the Institute of Applied and Decorative Art. He taught ceramics. Later he specialized in art glass. [Lvov is the center of art glass work.] We got a very small room, six square meters, at a students' hostel in Armianskaya Street. There was no heating or gas in this room. Our room was on the 3rd floor and the toilet was on the 1st floor. We couldn't have Anna with us. She was staying with my mother in Riga. She couldn't get a job and stayed with our daughter. Andrei and I sent them half of our salary. My mother gave all her love to her granddaughter. She took her to sport clubs and when Anna grew up she entered the Institute of Physical Culture in Riga.

In Lvov we were received coolly at first. But I don't think that it had anything to do with anti-Semitism. They treated all moscals that way. [Mosicals is a slang name for Russians of Western Ukraine.] But in the early 1950s, during the undisguised anti-Semitic campaign, all Jews were accused of Zionism and fired from the institute. They created unbearable conditions for me at work and I had to quit. Andrei followed me. We went to work at the Art College in 1951 and worked there for seven years until representatives from the Institute of Applied and Decorative Art found Andrei and asked him to return to the institute. He became head of the department of art glass and held it for many years. I took to the development of trademarks and illustrations.

Stalin died in 1953. I grieved along with other people, crying and wondering what would happen to us. All information about the real Stalin released at the congress [the Twentieth Party Congress] [14](#) was new to me.

In 1954 my father returned from the Gulag. At first he couldn't find a job. Then he finally got employed at a scientific research institute in Moscow. He returned to his wife who had been waiting for him. My father was very grateful to Khrushchev [15](#) for the rehabilitation of millions of innocent people. Once my father was at the election center where he saw Khrushchev. My father lifted his hat and bowed and Khrushchev nodded. Every now and then my father visited us in Lvov, and I made trips to Moscow to see him. He died in Moscow in 1969. He was buried near his parents' grave in the Jewish cemetery in Moscow.

In 1960 we received a big two-room apartment in the center of Lvov. We picked up Anna from Riga; my mother stayed there some time longer. My brother Juli was married in 1946 and also lived in Riga. He had always been interested in many things: engineering, sports, and scuba diving. His wife is a nice Jewish woman. She taught chemistry at an institute in Riga. She became a candidate of sciences. They have two daughters. They moved to the US in 1984. They have a very good life there. My brother always calls me on my birthday.

My mother moved to Lvov in 1968. She often visited us and stayed for quite a long time. My mother loved her granddaughter and always spent a lot of time with her. Anna graduated from the Institute of Physical Culture, her specialty is calisthenics, and she became a teacher of physical culture. She is retired now and learns to make pieces of art glass. These goods are in great demand in Lvov and in Kiev. Anna got married in 1971. She married a sportsman, a fellow student. Her husband's mother is Belarus and his father is Ukrainian. My granddaughter Lena was born in 1979. She is an artist and works with glass items. Lena and I are very close. Neither Anna nor Lena was raised Jewish. They were raised as Soviet people. Anna's husband started to drink and they divorced some time later. Anna lived with her husband's family. Her in-laws adore her. Anna feels at ease with them. I'm a difficult person. Only when she began to do artwork did we find something in common. She calls me and we have our discussions on art subjects. My granddaughter Lena lives in Israel now. She went there with her husband, who is an IT specialist. He is Russian, but he managed to get employment in that country and they left. I am 82, and I won't be able to travel that far, but I look forward to them visiting me.

In 1984 my husband died due to heart trouble. My mother grew older but I never discussed her past life with her. She died in 1997 at the age of 102. In her last days she often called me and I ran to her. She asked me to sit by her bed. Once she took my hand and kissed it. She was probably asking my forgiveness for my childhood.

Have I identified myself as a Jew? Yes, I did, when I was forced to quit my job and restrained in my need to exhibit or display my works. As to my double surname: in 1994 I got a new Ukrainian passport and added my father's surname to my married name.

In 1992 I was admitted to the Jewish Culture Association. I took a breath of Jewish life. I got very interested in everything concerning Jews. It must be the voice of my heart. When asked, 'What does it mean to be a Jew?' I reply that I find it helps me to feel this way. It's a different experience for me to identify myself as a Jew. I attend the events at the Jewish community, which also supports me. I feel great in the Jewish community in Lvov. The charity organization of Bnai Brith helped me to publish a volume of my most recent pictures. The subject of all of them is Jewish life. The first picture in the book is Jewish Still Life: with a Torah scroll and Chanukkah lights. I dedicate many pictures to the work of Jewish people, everyday life, the culture of a small town and Biblical subjects. I also painted ancient Lvov, its streets and lanes, synagogues, fashion stores, violinists and organ grinders. I'm not much interested in contemporary life. I have some new ideas and spend much time working. I will have another series of paintings called The People of the Book. It's about our people that always turned to books to receive education. I have about two dozen portraits of remarkable Jews of all centuries. I create their portraits and not just copies of their appearances. I see these talented people and I try to get information about every person, and depict their manners and characters.

Glossary

1 Jewish Pale of Settlement

Certain provinces in the Russian Empire were designated for permanent Jewish residence and the Jewish population was only allowed to live in these areas. The Pale was first established by a decree by Catherine II in 1791. The regulation was in force until the Russian Revolution of 1917, although the limits of the Pale were modified several times. The Pale stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia, almost 5 million people, lived there. The overwhelming majority of the Jews lived in the towns and shtetls of the Pale. Certain privileged groups of Jews, such as certain merchants, university graduates and craftsmen working in certain branches, were granted to live outside the borders of the Pale of Settlement permanently.

2 Russian Revolution of 1917: Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during World War I, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

3 Guild I

In tsarist Russia merchants belonged to Guild I, II or III. Merchants of Guild I were allowed to trade with foreign merchants, while the others were allowed to trade only within Russia.

4 Communal apartment

The Soviet power wanted to improve housing conditions by requisitioning 'excess' living space of wealthy families after the Revolution of 1917. Apartments were shared by several families with each family occupying one room and sharing the kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other tenants. Because of the chronic shortage of dwelling space in towns communal or shared apartments continued to exist for decades. Despite state programs for the construction of more houses and the liquidation of communal apartments, which began in the 1960s, shared apartments still exist today.

5 Babel, Isaac Emmanuilovich (1894-1940)

Russian author. Born in Odessa, he received a traditional religious as well as a secular education. During the Russian Civil War, he was political commissar of the First Cavalry Army and he fought for the Bolsheviks. From 1923 Babel devoted himself to writing plays, film scripts and narrative works. He drew on his experiences in the Russian cavalry and in Jewish life in Odessa. After 1929, he fell foul of the Russian literary establishment and published little. He was arrested by the Russian secret police in 1939 and completely vanished. His works were 'rehabilitated' after Stalin's death.

6 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

7 Chagall, Marc (1889-1985)

Russian-born French painter. Since Marc Chagall survived two world wars and the Revolution of 1917 he increasingly introduced social and religious elements into his art.

8 Civil War (1918-1920)

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups – Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.

9 Aseyev, Nikolai (1889-1963)

Russian poet. Wrote about the Revolution of 1917 and later switched to romantic poetry.

10 Komsomol

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

11 Molotov, V

P. (1890-1986): Statesman and member of the Communist Party leadership. From 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs. On June 22, 1941 he announced the German attack on the USSR on the radio. He and Eden also worked out the percentages agreement after the war, about Soviet and western spheres of influence in the new Europe.

12 Gulag

The Soviet system of forced labor camps in the remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, which was first established in 1919. However, it was not until the early 1930s that there was a significant number of inmates in the camps. By 1934 the Gulag, or the Main Directorate for Corrective Labor Camps, then under the Cheka's successor organization the NKVD, had several million inmates. The prisoners included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals, along with political and religious dissenters. The Gulag camps made significant contributions to the Soviet economy during the rule of Stalin. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. After Stalin died in 1953, the population of the camps was reduced significantly, and conditions for the inmates improved somewhat.

13 Mikhoels, Solomon (1890-1948) (born Vovsi)

Great Soviet actor, producer and pedagogue. He worked in the Moscow State Jewish Theater (and was its art director from 1929). He directed philosophical, vivid and monumental works. Mikhoels was murdered by order of the State Security Ministry

14 Twentieth Party Congress

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

15 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)

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