

Sarah Zauer

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Kohtla-Jarve

Estonia

Interviewer: Alexandr Dusman

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UNCLEAR WHAT IS MEANT BY FOLLOWING LINE IN ANECDOTE, INTENDED TO SHOW HUMOR, IN TEXT: One day she said: "If God wants to punish somebody, he bereaves him of his mind."

To begin my story I would first remember Mmy mother's grandfather Meir Yasinover. He was a legendary person, because he kept both his faith and his language although he served in the czarist army for 25 years. It took much courage. When he returned home after the army, he married and lived with his family in Balta, near Odessa.

His son Haim Yasinover, my grandfather, was born in 1855 and, after finishing cheder, he lived with his family in Ananyev, near Odessa. Grandfather did not serve in the army. His wife, Ester, my grandmother, was uneducated. She took care of the household. They brought up nine children. The native tongue in the family was Yiddish.

My grandfather and grandmother were very religious. As a regular visitor of the synagogue, Grandfatherpa even had his personal place there. They kept a kosher household. Shabbat was sacred. On Shabbat, the extended family - -- children, then grandchildren - -- gathered in their house. Grandmother cooked perfectly the traditional Jewish dishes: kugel, latkes and kreplach. But those dishes were prepared only on holidays, because the family was led a very poor life and barely made ends meet.

My mother remembered that in Ananyev they had a small cob workhouse covered with straw. Stoves were warmed with pressed dung. There were hens and ducks in the yard. We gathered their feathers and made pillows and featherbeds.

My grandfather had some horses. He was a carter and took goods to the merchants. Grandfather engaged some workers when his business ran well. When the eldest sons grew up, they helped him. I think all the children went to cheder.

But soon life became absolutely intolerable. At the beginning of 20th century, Jewish pogroms began in Russia. As Mother told me that , there were three or four pogroms every year. It was very terrifying. All of a

sudden, a crowd of infuriated people appeared on the street - who were armed with axes, sticks, iron rods. They rushed into the Jewish houses, plundered, broke and destroyed everything - except for the portraits of the emperor and empress - beat and killed adults and children. If the thugs were natives, they never harmed Grandfather's house. They cried: "Here lives Haim; his father waged war for the czar." But when strangers came to make a pogrom, they had no mercy. Ukrainian neighbors hid children; adults hid on their own. The thugs especially liked to rip open pillows and featherbeds. After the pogrom, we were up to our knees in feathers.

During one pogrom, Motherum,, who was 13 then, didn't have time to escape and she hid under a bed. The drunken Cossacks saw the Jewish girl under a bed. They began to "have a good time" - -- to thrust their saberes into her, piercing and cutting her legs. Her wounds didn't heal for a while. The local authorities, to cover their responsibility, sent her for medical treatment to Odessa, at their own expense. The next year she had to walk on crutches. But one leg remained misshapen for the rest of her life.

The pogroms did not stop, and because of the intensifying anti-Semitism, Haim Yasinover decided to leave Russia. In 1910, he went by rail to Harbin, China. One year later, the rest of his family followed him. After tryhaving tried different jobs, Haim became a real estate broker. Although Haim's income was not very high, the family was materially secure. At that time, Harbin could be considered a Russian town; Russian was the most widely spoken language. The Jewish community in Harbin was quite large, and there was a synagogue there, as well. The Jewish traditions in the Yasinover family didn't change, but younger children didn't get a religious education, only a secular one. In Harbin, they went to Russian schools and gymnasia.

I remember Aunt Zina and Uncle Grisha the best. Zina was the youngest daughter and the favorite of our family. She was born in Ananyev and she finished the Russian gymnasium in Harbin. She was very attractive and had a nice, strong voice. She took singing lessons. Aunt Zina always took part in Jewish parties for charity. She married Joseph Robinson, who worked in a bank. They had a daughter, Tanya. Their family was one of the first to feel the negative changes in Harbin, and they left for Shanghai. Robinson started his brokerage there. Tanya went to a prestigious French school. She was good at English and French. Their family was a member of the French club. Tanya married a young man from a well-to-do Jewish family, and they moved to Canada. At the beginning of the 1950s, Aunt Zina and her husband left for the United States.

Uncle Grisha had a printing house, which the communists nationalized. He was married a few times but he did not have any children. Later he lived alone. His business was his main interest in his life. He took the loss of

his printing house very hard. Later we got a letter from Uncle Geisha's housekeeper. She wrote that Uncle Grisha was ill. He was sent to a nursing home in Denmark, where he died at the beginning of the 1960s.

Ester Yasinover, my grandmother, died in Harbin at the beginning of the 1940s. After World War II, Haim left for Israel to settle with his son, and he died there at the age of 95.

My mother, Anna Yasinover, was born in 1893 in Ananyev. She only had an elementary education. She married Israel Liberman in Harbin. Before getting married, she worked for in a milliner and in a sewing workshop. After her marriage, she was a housewife. She spoke Russian and Yiddish.

My father , Israel Liberman, was born in 1898 in Bialystok, Poland, in an Orthodox Jewish family. I don't know much about his family, because they lived pretty far away, in Poland, and we had never seen them. But I do know that they spoke Yiddish. My father had a traditional Jewish education and spoke both Yiddish and Polish. Later, in Harbin he learned Russian and a little bit of English.

My father was a well-educated person. He studied in cheder for three years, and he finished secondary school. I'm not sure what language they used in school, but I think it was Polish. I remember that in China my father wrote articles for American newspapers and he received an honorarium for that. My mother was proud of her husband. In Poland, my father used to work in a printing house and had a command of different some skills. He could work as a printer, typesetter and proof-reader. I don't know where he learned the printing trade.

In 1920, Father decided to go from Poland to America - not in the most common way, but via Russia and China. But he had to stop in Harbin because he lacked the money to go on. He met my mother there, and they got married in 1920. Father worked as a printer in a printing house. In one year, he saved enough money to open his own print shop. He bought the equipment on credit. He started to work first with Mother, and later he was able to engage workers - -- printers, typesetters, book-binders. They printed advertisements, office books, theatre programs for theatre, etc. My mother printed visiting cards, using a small printing machine. The print shop was in the same building in which we rented an apartment. The print shop was on the first floor, and we lived on the second floor.

In 1937, Father received an order from the Polish Embassy in China to print an advertising catalogue. Poland wanted to recover trade with Japan and China. Father went to Poland, Japan and all over China to collect advertising. These catalogues were published in 1937 and 1938. In 1938, the family left for Shanghai because fascist organizations appeared in Harbin in 1936-1937. There were fascists with anti-Semitic slogans in the streets.

We waited to leave for the USA. Preparing the 1939 edition of the catalogue, Father went to Poland again. It was in August 1939. At the Polish Embassy, they warned him about the danger of staying in Poland. But Father did not want to let down the advertisers, and maybe he did not understand how serious the situation was in Europe. He was in Warsaw on September 1, 1939. He had time to transfer money to his family; after this, there was no message from him. In 1940, he sent a strange letter, without his signature, from Brest. He wrote that he was working in a printing house. This was the last letter from him.

In 1963, Dov Lutskiy, Father's nephew, who was living in Tel Aviv, found me. He wrote that his parents' family from Bialystok and my father had been lost in a German concentration camp during the Holocaust.

With the money that was sent by Father, Mother bought a big apartment and rented out rooms. Jews -- refugees from Austria, Germany, Poland -- lived there. During the war, on demand of the Germans, the Japanese authorities created a Jewish ghetto in the area where Jews - refugees - -- lived. Mother remained in the ghetto too, since her apartment was there. But no Jew was subjected to repression by the Japanese.

The ghetto looked like this: All Jewish refugees had to live together in the same district. Refugees rented rooms or flats there. The Red Cross organized the camp for the indigent refugees. The indigents lived and were fed there.

The permanent inhabitants of the district - the Chinese, Russians, Jews - stayed in their flats. They had a pass with a red stripe, and Jews had a pass with a yellow stripe. There was a curfew for refugees. The commandant was a Japanese officer. During the military actions, when the Americans bombed Shanghai, some bombs fell on the refugee camp. There were many victims. The Americans never bombed residential areas, and this was an accident.

My name is Sarah Sussana Liberman. I was born in Harbin in 1923, and I was an only child. I lived there until 1938 and went to the English school. My parents spoke Yiddish among themselves and Russian and Yiddish with me. We had a very cozy, comfortable four-room flat -- with a bath, hot water, -- nice furniture, a piano, radio and a Chinese servant who helped my mother keep house. We read newspapers in Russian, English, and my father dad read in Yiddish. We went to the public library. My parents had a few friends who came to visit us. They were all Jews; my girlfriends were Jewish, too. My childhood passed in peace and love.

My parents, especially Father, went to synagogue, but the family was more secular than religious. Still, we ate kosher food at home and on Friday we lit the Shabbat candles. On Friday evenings, we were at home or at

Grandfather's house. On Saturdays, we had lessons at school, so I had to carry my books myself, read and write. We had only Sundays free. Of the Jewish holidays, we celebrated Purim and Passover.

I was a happy child. On Sundays, I spent my time with my parents. We went for a walk, to the cinema, we visited children's parties, and had dinner at a restaurant. In the evening, my parents went to the theatre or to a concert.

My father was a musical person. He played the harmonium. Sometimes he arranged a concert for my mother and me - -- he sang Jewish songs in Yiddish, popular songs in English, and Polish songs.

I was taught to play the piano. I had music lessons at home. My father dreamed that I would graduate from the Academy of Music and become a pianist. But that was in vain. I had three girlfriends - -- Galia, Frida and Sarah - -- who were my schoolmates. They often came to see me. We went together to cinema, theatre, sports competitions, and on bicycle rides. In the summer, I went to a summer resort with my mother for three months. In Harbin, there was a big river called Sungary, and on the other side of the river there were bungalows. We liked being there.

In Harbin, I was a member of the Zionist youth organization Betar. It prepared the youth for the future Jewish State. The state didn't exist yet, and the activists of the Zionist movement did not expect an easy life in Israel. That's why they grew strong, healthy youth. Boys were engaged in boxing, wrestling and jujitsu. For girls, it was gymnastics, track and field athletics, games. We had a uniform: a brown skirt (or trousers) and shirt, yellow tie and a field cup with a menorah on it. When we met, we sang the anthem of Israel, "Hatikvah," and other songs in Hebrew. Many members of Betar then left for Palestine.

In 1933 or 1934, there was a procession for some Japanese holiday in Harbin. A column of marchers from Betar went near a column of fascists - black shirts. The Zionists carried a white and blue flag with the "Magen David," and the fascists carried a flag with a black swastika. And all sang the Japanese anthem in Japanese. At that time, we did not know yet what fascism was, but the first understanding came very soon. In the house next to us there was a German family. I was friendly with their son Erich. He was also a member of a children's organization, but a fascist one. He told me that they sang songs, too, played sports and wore uniforms. He spent one summer in the children's fascist camp, and when he returned he told me that I could not even approach him because I was a Jew and he was Aryan, the representative of a supreme race. Then he said Jews did not have any right to exist at all. I felt insulted and terrible.

I finished school in Shanghai. It was the Jewish school, but the classes were conducted in English. I have no memories about my schools in Harbin and Shanghai. I only remember that my school was very far from our house and that we had to travel on a double-decker bus and ride for about one hour. During our trip to school we could repeat our lessons. Sometimes we went to school on a rickshaw. After finishing school, I completed a shorthand and typing course and worked as a secretary in an American firm.

We were waiting for permission to go to the USA and we got it at the end of 1939. My father was not with us at that time. But my mother believed he would return. She was afraid that Father would not find us if we left for the USA, so we stayed in Shanghai. We ran a boarding house and it helped maintain our family. I worked as a secretary-typist, then as a bookkeeper. It was wartime and many firms closed. It was difficult to find a job.

I met my future husband, Paul Zauer, in 1942 in an outdoor café where I went with my girlfriend. Paul was Russian; he came with his mother from Russia in 1922. He was an independent person by this time, six years older than I. He worked as a foreman at a Swiss steel mill and took correspondence courses at the London Architectural College. He spoke Russian and English.

My relatives did not like it that he was Russian, and his relatives did not like it that I was Jewish. TAs for us, it did not matter. We were going out for almost two years, and our parents accepted it in the end. It was war time, so our wedding was very modest - -- just the registration and a festive party for the relatives. My husband and I were married for 44 years. The national question was never a cause of quarrel or difference of opinions between us.

Now I must return to 1943, when the Soviet club was opened in Shanghai. Paul and I were active members. It was a very interesting and merry place. There were parties, concerts and lectures about the USSR. I took part in the performances. We sang Soviet songs, saw Soviet films. Representatives from the Soviet Embassy came and told us about the position at the front. They showed orders and medals. We listened to the Soviet radio.

After the victory in Germany, later in Japan, the prestige of the Soviet Union grew, especially among the Russian-speaking population of China.

At last in 1948 a Shanghai Russian newspaper published a decree of the Soviet Government that all interested Russian-speaking people could depart for to the USSR. We decided to go to this remarkable country, which defeated fascism, where all people had equal rights and all people were heroes. We were not afraid of the difficulties. We were glad that our son, who was born in 1946, could grow up in this wonderful country. To tell the truth, my mother did not want to go there but we persuaded her. About 10,000

people wanted to go to the USSR. Russian immigrant newspapers frightened us: "You will be deported to camp in Siberia. Change your mind! Where are you going?" But we did not believe them. My mother sold our flat and my husband left his well-paid job.

We gave back our passports and at the end of 1948 we moved from Shanghai to Vladivostok. We traveled for three days, but instead of Vladivostok our ship arrived in the port Nakhodka. At that time there were camps with watchtowers, which were enclosed with barbed wire. We lived there in a barrack for one month. Before us, Japanese captives had lived there. There were people of different nations among us. There were some Jewish families, too. In Shanghai we were told that we could choose where we would live. We chose Ukraine or the Caucasus. In Nakhodka we were told: "Choose! Siberia or the Urals." We were afraid of Siberia and we decided to go to the Urals. We were put into vans used for heated goods, and were given food. We traveled for one month.

At last we arrived in the North Urals, at a town called Krasnoturinsk. We were given one room in a barrack. We collected a stock of firewood; we sawed and chopped wood ourselves. Around our town, there were only camps of political and criminal prisoners. The main population of the town was former prisoners and exiles. They did not have a right to leave there.

We worked at the camp. I worked as a timekeeper in the political prisoners' camp. I had to check the time the workers came to work and the time they left. Most of the workers were prisoners; their team-leaders came to me and we checked their work time. Paul worked as a building master in the criminal prisoners' camp. There were many interesting people in the town: engineers, professors, the military (they came back from captivity), former Polish officers. Paul had difficulties because the criminals did not want to work and he could not command. In this situation, he became depressed and we were very afraid for him. We lived through this period thanks to my mother. She went shopping, stood in lines, bought food, sold our things - our clothes, porcelain - prepared meals, looked after my child, and encouraged us with Jewish humor. One day she said: "If God wants to punish somebody, he bereaves him of his mind."

After one year, life became easier for us. We got a room in a house with modern conveniences. We got jobs in the municipal economy. I worked as a secretary-typist and Paul worked as an engineer. I always dreamed about theatre. There was an amateur theatre in the cultural centre in Krasnoturinsk. I took part in two comedies, and they were a success. The third performance was about war time. I had the main role --- of a Russian secret agent. When I appeared on the stage, there was an exclamation from the front rows, where the authorities sat: "Jewish!" After this, the performance was halted and my career as an actress was finished.

Our neighbors were Estonians. They had been deported from Estonia - -- rich people whose property was confiscated. They were nice, intelligent people. They helped our family assimilate to the new conditions of our everyday life. We were very grateful for their help.

At the end of 1952, we felt we had come to the attention of the KGB. They came to our neighbors at times and asked about our family. It was the time when all people who came from abroad were suspected of being spies. We were lucky enough not to be arrested, because Stalin died in 1953. After the amnesty in 1953, our Estonian friends went back to Estonia. They said we should go live there. From 1953, we too could move wherever we liked, except the capital cities. So we found ourselves in Estonia, in the town Kohtla-Järve, where I have been living since 1953.

At first we had difficulties in finding accommodations and jobs, but these were solved. My husband worked as an operator in a chemical plant until he retired. He died in 1988. I finished a bookkeepers' training course,s and worked as a bookkeeper in the phone company and local trade union committee until retirement.

We spoke Russian at home. We would probably be fully assimilated by now, if it were not for my mother. She lived with us until her death in 1962. She kept the house, and helped us bring up our son. She didn't let us forget that we were Jews. She told our son about her family, Jewish traditions and holidays; she cooked Jewish dishes. Thanks to my mother, my son and his children realized that they are Jews.

There was no synagogue in Kohtla-Järve, but at home we tried to keep Jewish holidays. My husband also took part in our celebrations, and my son with his family did, too. My husband and I tried to keep as far away as possible from anything political - -- no Communist activities, no unpaid social work. They were taboo for us. Sometimes we went to the May 1 demonstrations just for fun, not for politics.

After Stalin's death, we were allowed to send correspondence to China. At last, we could learn something about our relatives. My mother's brother stayed in China. The others left - -- some to the USA, others to Israel. We were afraid to write to them. But when we decided to write, nobody answered. Maybe they changed their address.

In Kohtla-Järve, our son, Anatoly, finished school, then the Technical College. He got married and his family left for the town of Narva. His wife is from a mixed family; her father is a Jew, her mother is Russian. Anatoly worked as an operator of turbine at an electric power station.

In 1989, the Jewish Community was restored in Estonia. After my husband's death, it was my salvation against loneliness. I found many new friends. I

have been actively taking part in all events of the Jewish community. I also am the bookkeeper of our community. After restoring our community, all our members were euphoric that we could call ourselves Jews, listen to and sing Jewish songs, have Jewish holidays. The youth rushed to Israel.

Our grandson Boris studied at Tartu University, at the Faculty of Medicine. He and his Jewish friends dreamed about Israel. Our family - -- meI, my son, Anatoly, his wife, Lyudmila, their children, Boris and Anna - began to obtain the documents necessary to emigrate. Lyudmila and Anna began to study Hebrew seriously. But Fate managed otherwise. During the Chernobyl accident, Boris served in the Soviet Army not far from Chernobyl. Some years later, his health started to deteriorate and we lost him in 1992. It was a very terrible blow for us. Soon after that, Anatoly had a heart attack. Our move to Israel was canceled. Now Lyudmila is the head master of the Jewish Sunday school in Narva. She also teaches Hebrew there. My granddaughter Anna took a correspondence course at the Jewish University in Moscow for two years. She left for Israel in 1997. She is a nurse. She lives and works in Jerusalem. She married a French Jew, and the native language for them became Hebrew. This is how our family came back to its Jewish roots.