

Fira Greenberg, interviewed September 14, 2017

Summary by: Joseph Bradley, February 13, 2019

Fira Greenberg, neé Feldman b. 24 May 1936 in Leningrad

Family

Father: Zamon Pesaeovich (?) Feldman b. 1909 in Klichev, Bobruisk district, Mogilevskaia oblast, Belorusskaia SSR. One of 7 children. Went to vocational school [Rabfak] and worked at record player factory in Leningrad.

Mother: Sofia Evseevna Belkina b. 1912 in Batsevichi, Bobruisk district, Mogilevskaia oblast, Belorusskaia SSR. One of 7 children. Her father Evsei Belkin worked as a dispatcher in a timber yard; her mother Sara Belkina was a seamstress. Sofia became a nurse.

Zamon and Sofia m. 1934; Fira was oldest child. Secular, assimilated Jewish family. Fira describes prewar communal apartment and neighbors, several of whom were Jews. Lived near a synagogue. Sofia was a nurse at Fira's kindergarten.

[Note that her sister Yelena Feldman Kleyner was also interviewed by USHMM: RG-50.030.0950]

WWII

On June 22, 1941, Fira was with her parents and many guests at a dacha outside Leningrad. Suddenly, the adults seemed very concerned and many people left. Her father was drafted immediately; he was a Party member and was a political officer (Politruk, in Russian) in the army. In July, the children began to be evacuated from Leningrad. As the kindergarten nurse, her mother was evacuated with Fira, first to the outskirts of Moscow. In Fall 1941, as the Germans approached Moscow, the children were re-evacuated by boat (the Lermontov) on the Volga, then the Kama River. The boat was bombed by the Germans. Luckily, as the boat began to sink, it was close to a sawmill. The children were rescued by crawling on planks, laid out on the still thin ice from the shore to the boat. The evacuation continued by freight train until some 800 children reached Molotov (now Perm) and, finally, Solikamsk in the Urals. Fira tells the story of her mother's efforts to vaccinate the children while on a moving train. Her mother was pregnant on the journey, and on Feb. 1, 1942, Elena was born.

Fira describes evacuation life in Vil'va, a village near Solikamsk, on the Kama River. The children had left Leningrad in the summer and had no winter clothing. In an effort to keep warm, their bodies were spread with grease and then wrapped in newspapers; they slept on straw in little huts used for guard dogs. Several children froze to death. More waves of evacuees came from Leningrad. Fira went to first grade in the village and describes her schooling.

Fira and her mother returned to Leningrad in June 1945. Fira describes how parents were reunited with children they had not seen in four years and did not recognize. Many children came back as orphans.

Fira's father was wounded twice and also returned to Leningrad. Fira, her parents and her sister were able to come back to the same apartment.

Fira's relatives during the war

The relatives who lived in Leningrad before the war survived. Sofia's brother Noam and his wife Raya, and their daughters Fira and Mila (Mila now lives in Boston), were evacuated to Chelyabinsk, also in the Urals. Zamon's brother Grisha was in the army. His wife Ida and son Arkady were evacuated somewhere near Tashkent. Fira's father's brother was in the army and his two sisters, Dora and Sonya, were evacuated to Valdai.

Not so fortunate were the relatives who lived in Batsevichi and Klichev, Belarus. Grandmother Sara Belkina and her son Grisha survived but heard about the fate of other relatives. In the winter 1941-42, grandfather Evsei and another son Noam were shot. As Sara was being led to an execution point, she escaped through a hole in the fence and ran away. Grisha had already fled a raid in the village and was running along the river where Sara found him. For the next two years, Sara and Grisha and three other Jews hid in dugouts in the forest, occasionally protected by Jewish partisan units. All the rest of the relatives were killed, including Fira's paternal grandparents. Two of Fira's father's brothers (Leib; Fira couldn't remember the name of the other one) were killed in the war. After the war, Sara and Grisha came back to their house in Batsevichi only to find it occupied by neighbors who refused to let them back; Sara and Grisha settled in Bobruisk.

Postwar life

Fira describes school #259 in Leningrad. She did not experience anti-Semitism until the Doctor's Plot in 1953, when teachers became more critical and did not give 5's [A's] to Jewish students. One gold medal winner was refused admission to institutes and was told, "Your quota is filled." Like some other Jewish students, Fira got around this problem by entering the evening division of the Philological Institute. Jews were afraid they would be exiled from Leningrad. A doctor friend of the family was taken away one night, but returned in 1955. Aunt Raya had a brother who was sent to the camps but returned in 1956. Fira graduated, got a job and worked for 40 years at a Design Bureau. In answer to a question, Fira said that after Stalin's death, anti-Semitism depended on the leadership of any given organization. Fira said her institute was always very supportive of her, especially when her husband [not named] died.

Even though Fira loved Leningrad, the late Soviet years were tense. In 1989 members of the nationalist organization Pamyat shouted "Yids leave!" and there were fears the "lumpen" (chern' in Russian) would start pogroms. Mayor Anatoly Sobchak and politician Galina Starovoita appealed to Gorbachev to avert violence. In 1990 news came of the pogrom of Armenians in Baku. In 1989 Fira's son [not named] left. Finally, in 1992, Fira, her daughter [not named], her sister Lena and three other family members left Russia for the U.S.