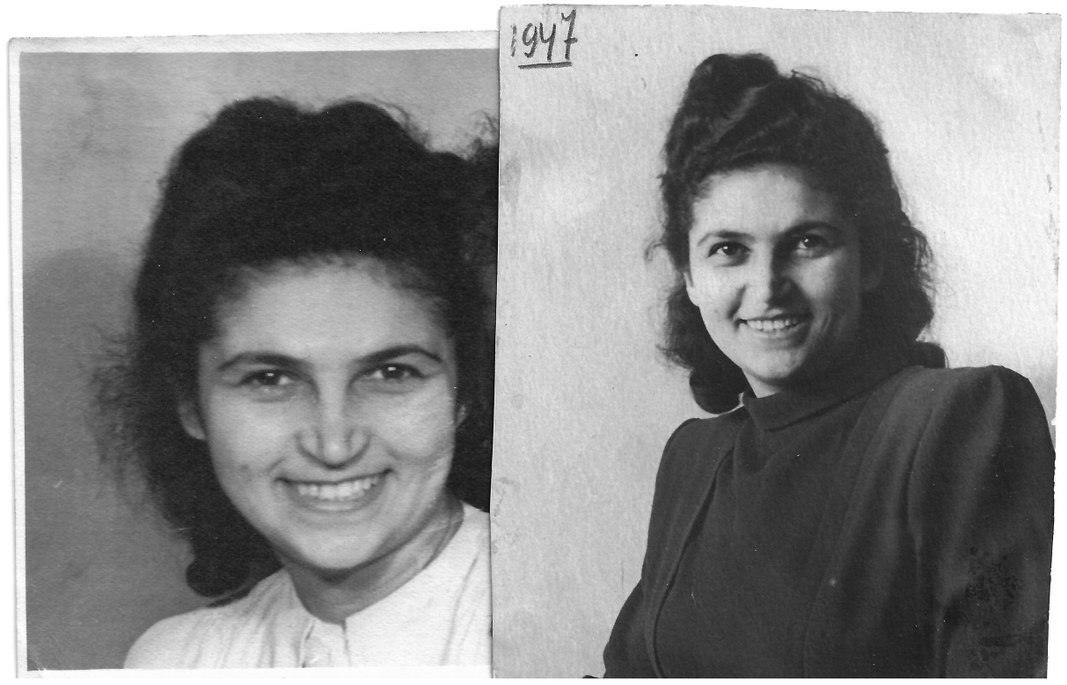

Khaya Shifrina, the author's grandmother, pictured here in 1947.

MEMOIR, ANNOTATED: NOTES ON MY GRANDMOTHER'S STORY

KATYA APEKINA

11-11-99
[*The evening after my grandmother's funeral, on February 14, 2018, I sat down with these memoirs, which she'd typed and given me 18 years earlier, and began to read them for the first time.*]

Prologue:
When I started writing these notes, I wanted for my son and his daughter [*Me*] to know a little about our ancestors, about our life, and the Jewish traditions that we observed in our home in Poland where I grew up and lived until I was 16 years old. I also wrote this so that they wouldn't repeat my mistakes, the mistakes that I made. [*The family mythology around my grandmother was that she was not a person who admitted mistakes.*] But it looks like I have not succeeded at this. You see, I wasn't able to type my notes for a long time, because I did not have a typewriter, and they were not satisfied with my handwritten notes, and they did not find the time to read them. [*I can picture my grandmother at her dining room table, sitting in the shadows of the aloe plants, her jaunty gray bouffant bent over the notes she was making on the backs of envelopes with a craggy pencil she'd sharpened with a knife.*]

More than four years passed, when Victor [*My dad*] finally gave us a computer that I could type on in Russian. During this time, my granddaughter grew from a 7th grader to an 11th grader, and my grandson was born, and the cares in the family increased. I began to study the computer, but then I didn't quite type it right and again the process was prolonged. To be perfectly honest, I doubted that they wanted or needed any of this. Maybe only I needed this. [*The guilt is laid on thick here, but it's deserved. Why had I waited so long to read this? Why had I waited until after she was dead? I'm not asking myself this rhetorically, but genuinely. My grandmother had been presenting herself, her story, to me and I had been avoiding it. Why? It was not an absence of curiosity. Maybe I had assumed that whataver knowledge I gained, would come with an obligation. An obligation to take on*

her worldview? Or to carry on an ancestral burden? It's abstract, and yet something I can feel, weighted in my body, as I read my grandmother's story.]

But I hope that one day they will read my notes and learn how their mom and Grandma Khaya lived in her time, what she lived through and how life is complicated, and some things you cannot prepare for. The most important thing is to be a *mensch*, work hard and hope that you can overcome anything, and to always remember your loved ones.

And so, my maiden name is Pisetskaya. My father is Rubin Isaakovich Pisetsky. We lived in Vawkavysk. His father was Itzhak, his mother was Lea. I don't know their patronymics as we lived in Poland where they did not use patronymics the way they do in Russia. I don't believe my father's parents were from Vawkavysk as I don't remember anyone from his family coming to visit. I don't even know if they had close relatives, since at grandmother Lea's funeral nobody came. [*Not many people came to my grandmother's funeral either. There's a Jewish tradition that you need 10 Jewish men to serve as pallbearers. I remember sitting in the car outside the funeral home with my dad, both of us calling and texting everyone we knew to find enough men to come out on a weekday and perform this mitzvah — they didn't have to be practicing or religious, they could be atheists, but they needed to be Jewish along their mother's blood line. Eventually, the funeral home loaned us a Jewish man, and we made the count.*] I was a little girl then, though I remember the day of her death well. It was in the winter on a Friday. It was a sunny day and on the eve of her death she wanted us to bury her before noon so that we could prepare everything for Saturday. This is what we did. She was like a martyr. [*Great-Great-Grandma Lea did not want her death to interfere with the family's Shabbat preparations. Maybe she thought the routines of religious life would bring everyone comfort? This desire not to be a burden is so foreign to me that at first it struck me as passive aggressive.*]

My dad was a tall, attractive man with gray eyes. He was fairly fit. He was a watchmaker, like his older brother. Until 1935, we had a store selling gramophones, watches, spoons, forks, rings and other jewelry. He would repair watches and do nickel-plating. [*My dad said my grandmother told him that she liked to tinker with watches too, but that she always found herself at the end, with extra parts. This detail does not jive at all with my childhood vision of her as someone competent and precise, who surely would never have loose parts! Or my mother's version of her, which would be the kind of person who would not admit this, who would shove the loose parts in and pretend the clock worked fine.*] But soon we had to close the store, because there was a lot of competition.

My father dreamed of leaving Poland. He wrote letters to the Queen of England, and to the President of the United States, Roosevelt, asking for permission to enter, but of course he did not get permission. In the years 1935-36, my father went to Palestine, probably as a tourist. He hoped that he would settle there and then send for the family. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to bring us back with him and he was forced to return after a year or year and a half. [*So, for a year and a half, with probably very limited communication, they lived without him. When I was little, I too had to live for a while without my father. When I immigrated to the United States, I came with my mother and her parents, and my father had not been able to come with us. My grandmother, the one writing these memoirs, needed to grant him permission so he could leave the Soviet Union and she'd refused to do so. My earliest memory is asking my mother, when I saw a bearded man on the street, if it was my father. It was not.*]

He came back by ship. I do not remember exactly what he told us about his travels, but I know that everyone was worried, because at that time such a trip was quite dangerous. There was no one to help him, because we were all too little, and so he returned home and again began to plan something, but soon the war started.

As a child, I had no opportunity to learn to skate because of money and time, same goes for playing the piano. Sometimes on Saturdays, I went to see how other students skated in a private skating rink. In our school, the day off was on Saturday, and Jews are not allowed to skate on that day. On weekdays, it was too far and too late to go to the skating rink after school. In all likelihood, I did not have much desire to learn to skate. [*I don't know that I entirely believe this. It's so easy to picture her on the edge of the rink, hands deep in her pockets, full of longing, swaying as the other kids practice their jumps.*]

As an adult, when I lived in Alexandrov, slowly, I learned to skate a bit at the ice rink, which we prepared and filled next to the club by the factory. Together with the director of the factory, Comrade Boris Rafailovich Stronsky, we mastered this rink. He, however, came to skate after our departure, at around 11 o'clock at night. [*A Soviet bureaucrat, bundled and in a fur cap, skating alone at night — what an image.*] I learned to skate with great difficulty. My legs twisted under me. I fell many times, but did not give up. I think what added to my difficulty is that I started learning late in life, and was tired after work and we were fed so badly.

But I never learned how to play the piano, I must not have tried very hard, and it's a pity, as it would have come in handy. At home we even had a grand piano. I remember that I wanted to learn how to play it, but I was tone deaf, as one teacher said when my father had invited him to our house.

At the time, it had felt like a very big flaw in myself, and I tried not to come near the instrument. We were not so rich as to hire an instructor when a child did not have abilities or any real interest. Later, when Victor was learning how to play and we bought a piano, I also tried to learn to play, but I had no time, and I couldn't do it quickly. [*My mom said that my grandmother would grow furious with my dad over his bad playing and would call him names, including "fascist." It makes sense that our frustrations with others are reflections of our frustrations with ourselves.*]

In 1936, I came to visit my Aunt Ethel for the summer in Grodno. She introduced me to a girl who lived across from us. She was about my age, maybe a year or two older. She taught me some songs that her brothers apparently sang, but it wasn't very interesting and it was rather sad for me. [*I wonder if the implication here is that there was something sexual or "adult" in the song that was taught to her, something improper that made her feel this way. My grandmother was very conservative about sex.*] I wrote a poem in Hebrew expressing how I felt:

> The good days have gone, have already passed,
> Only their quiet shadows remain
> The days of childhood are gone, those days of freedom and joy,
> Now the days are vague and sad
> It seems, these are the days of adolescence, of growing up.

I've remembered this song for the rest of my life, even the melody that I picked out on the piano for it.

[*This moody song with its angst about growing up is so strange coming from my cheerful and pragmatic grandmother. It sounds like something I would have written. Nostalgia was an early emotion for me that I took to absurd levels — me at five grieving the loss of myself at four. Only now does it occur to me that this was probably related to immigrating at the age of three, severing with everything I had known right around the time that I was becoming a conscious person.*]

Once, at Aunt Ethel's house, I found a copy of a book on learning Esperanto. [*The language was created by a Polish ophthalmologist in the hopes that a universal second language would foster peace and international understanding.*] Aunt Ethel told me that the book belonged to my Mom, that before getting married, when she lived in Grodno, she had studied Esperanto. I, of course, became interested in the language and began studying its basics. I remember that it had a lot of Latin words, simple grammar, but alas, I didn't have an opportunity to study Esperanto as I left for home during the vacation and the war started September 1, 1939, when Germany attacked Poland and the Soviet Union captured Western Belarus, and free travel was forbidden in that part. Everything changed, and I didn't get to Grodno again, and the book disappeared along with all of my family and loved ones and I had other things to worry about. [*The song my grandmother wrote is all the more jarring because it ends up being prophetic — the days of her childhood really are gone so abruptly.*]

Once the war started on September 1, 1939, classes in schools stopped.

On September 17, the Soviet Union declared war on Poland under the guise of protecting the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples. The Polish troops left the city, but some

stayed behind. For two days the city was lawless, and it was scary to go out into the streets. Polish soldiers turned against the Jews, pranced around the city on horses, shot and killed a 14-year-old boy. One evening they broke into a Jewish house on Tatarskaya Street, the owner was killed and his wife was wounded. In the square where the synagogues were, shots were fired and people were threatened.

We were worried about my father, who went to the clock workshop in the morning and during the day we didn't know what was happening to him since we didn't have a phone. Miraculously, he managed to make it back home that evening.

After September 19, 1939, our life completely changed. New Russian people came in, they made their own rules, looted our stores. The soldiers harassed the kids, forced them to sell their wristwatches for a pittance [*In the Soviet Union, wristwatches were hard to come by so they took them from the kids*]. Very soon there were long lines at the stores, sugar soon disappeared, all the good candies were gone, instead they were replaced by some sort of round suckers (disgusting).

It was necessary to learn Russian, which became the state language. I found Russian books in our attic, and started learning it in September. My mother showed me the Russian alphabet, and I read aloud to her. She corrected my pronunciation and thus I quickly learned to read. I remember that I read for such a long time that a white foam would form in my mouth. [*What a writerly detail! Rabid with Russian.*]

After leaving school, I became a student of the Minsk Medical Institute, where I needed to go to fulfill my Mother's dream of becoming a doctor. [*This obligation to the dreams of one's parents — I wonder if it felt like a burden to her. Her mother had not been able to become a doctor and ultimately my grandmother had not either, and then my father, when it came time to apply to medical school, was also thwarted because he was Jewish.*]

When I arrived in Minsk I was lodged in a barrack-style dorm with other first years on Belomorskaya Street. In our room there were 12-14 girls from different cities.

For me, a new independent life began. It was unfamiliar and unknown and took getting used to. It was very difficult to adjust to the food. At home, I was used to kosher meals, fruits and vegetables. There was none of this here. I tried to go to the canteen at the factory but I couldn't touch the food. Then I found a healthy cafeteria on the 3rd floor, where I could at least take milk soup, with fish or chicken. It wasn't kosher, but I had to eat. As my grandfather said, "science demands sacrifices." It was the Soviet Union. [*I find it hard to believe that her grandfather said this — it sounds like such a Soviet aphorism.*]

The stores had a limited choice of products, although different types of sausages, eggs, butter, sugar, several types of bread products, candy, fish, etc. were exhibited in the shop

windows. [*I have never gone hungry. This is the exacting list of a person who has been hungry.*] I was so naïve to think that the store carried all the things that were on display since that is what the stores did back in Poland. My friend Tsilya from Minsk explained to me that the food in the windows — those were just props made of clay, sand and cardboard, and the stores did not actually carry them. I soon figured this out for myself when I went in to buy something. By the way, even after the war, what was displayed in the Moscow shop windows was not what was actually in the stores. [*American supermarkets completely blew my grandparents away. The oranges! The toilet paper! The cereals! After they immigrated to the United States, nine years after I did, they'd structure their days around going to sales at different supermarkets.*]

The last time I was at my parents' home was from April 11 to April 15, 1941, when they invited me to come home via telegram, which was the only way the school would issue a pass and release me from the institute. By then, you needed permission papers to go from Western Belarussia to Minsk.

As usual, my parents were very happy about my arrival. They gave me a lot of delicious Passover dishes and the address of our distant relatives from Minsk that I'd had trouble finding before.

The international situation was tense at that time and they were very worried, since they lived 40 km from the border with Poland, which the Germans occupied in 1939. My parents warned me not to return home if the war with Germany began that summer. They gave me the address of my mother's uncle from Moscow and said that they would try to come to me in Minsk. Thus, they said goodbye to me with a heavy soul. They had probably summoned me for Passover to see me and give me my uncle's address. Being young, I wasn't able to assess the situation and believe that something very scary could happen.

I returned to Minsk and continued to study without giving much thought to what my relatives had said, as the mood in Minsk was completely different. Only starting June 18, 1941, did we begin to get seriously worried when our classmate Masha received a call from her mother in Brest.

Lucy Beguze and I went with Masha into the city to the telephone station. Masha learned from her mother that her father, who was the director of a printing house in Brest, was taken away and that there was talk in the city about war with the Germans.

When we returned to the dorm, we discussed this issue with the guys from Baranavichy. They somehow reassured us, referring to the fact that before the harvest there can be no war, and that Masha was prone to exaggerated panic. Of course, I didn't want to believe that "the air smells like a thunderstorm" [*This is a line, my father tells me, from a popular song about the war.*] and that the war was coming.

I had to pass the last exam on June 24 and therefore on June 22 we went to the Chelyuskintsev Park, because the weather was beautiful and the park was not far from the dorm. The girls and I settled away from the center, far from people, where we could study for the upcoming exam without distraction. However, I was feeling restless. There were planes circling in the sky and I felt like they had something to do with the upcoming war, although the girls told me that in the summer it was always like that, that it was just flight training. I decided to come closer to the center to find out what was happening. As I approached the park entrance, it was about 11 o'clock, when we heard the voice of Molotov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, saying that today the Germans attacked the Soviet Union on June 22 at 4 a.m., bombed our cities, Kiev, etc.

Of course, we immediately became scared. Studying no longer seemed important. We went back to the other girls, told them and quickly gathered our things and went back to the dorm. Everyone there already knew and was worried, but the ones who were worried most were other "Westerners" like me, whose relatives lived close to the border.

While I was away from the dorm that morning, my acquaintance from Vawkavysk — Eli Ruchik, had come looking for me. Since I wasn't there, he promised to come back. I didn't want to go anywhere, because I didn't want to miss him again. I thought he'd come from Vawkavysk and had a message from my parents. But he didn't come back. [*The confusion, the misses, feeling frozen in place. I want so desperately for her to hear what the message had been, if there had even been a message.*]

By that evening, Sunday June 22, there was a command issued to the dormitory, for all students to gather on Monday June 23rd, 1941 at 9 a.m. at the Institute.

Since the tram lines near Komarovka were destroyed and the trams were not running, we left for the institute on Monday, June 23, at 7 a.m. to arrive by 9 a.m. Already in the morning, German planes were bombing the city, so we couldn't go directly through the center of town, but had to take an alternate route [*I can imagine her, shorter than the rest of her classmates, struggling to catch up, all of them walking quickly with their heads down, the smell of smoke and dust in the air.*] By 9 o'clock we got to the institute. We had time to gather in the Assembly Hall of the Faculty of Chemistry, where they told us that we could be drafted into military service, and that that we couldn't leave without getting permission. As they were telling us this, the building suddenly trembled, and the windows blew out. We were forced to go down to the basement room. Soon we learned that the bombs had hit the Physics building and the train station, located near the campus neighborhood.

The guys were sent to the station to unload the trains with the wounded, and we girls were told to sit in the basement. Thus, began the continuous bombing of the city, mainly its center. Only at about 3 o'clock, when there was a break in the bombing, did they let us go back to the dormitory and wait until they issued the next order.

We walked back as a group using a more direct route. The trams were not running, and we were surrounded by evidence of the bombing, but we didn't linger — we hurried back to the dorm.

Soon another round of bombing began, but we were already approaching the dormitory. When we got to the dorm, we decided that evening to dig a ditch in the yard to hide in during the bombing. We waited for further orders from the school administration.

On June 24-25, the bombing of the city continued, but there was no news from the school. I was waiting for someone from my family to contact me, so I didn't go anywhere with the groups that disappeared into the forest. There were fewer and fewer of us left, and when we were bombed we mostly hid in the ditch. [*In these situations, how do you know when to stay and when to go? It was luck that saved her, but also I believe there was a survival instinct. I think this survival instinct is what saved her later in Soviet Russia, but in a Soviet context it seemed to become more morally complicated.*]

On June 24, we heard from students we knew from the Polytechnic Institute, which was not far from our dorm, that they were talking about evacuation, but we hadn't heard anything about it.

At 11-12 o'clock on the night of June 26th, a 5th-year student from our institute came to our dorm. He might have been an acquaintance of one of the students. He quickly assembled us and said that the Germans were coming to the city and he would lead us out. There were 10-12 students. We packed very quickly, since we didn't bring anything with us. I remember that I only had candies and cookies, which I brought along on the road.

Our friend led us into the city center. We saw that the city was on fire, and people walking towards us shouted: "Don't go there, everything is on fire." But we were led by the student to the river, which we had to cross. Me and the shorter people were carried on other people's shoulders. [*She couldn't swim then. She learned as an adult.*] Unfortunately, I don't know the first or last name of our student who saved us, I only knew that his girlfriend lived in the room next door to mine. So he led us through the army territory, where they checked our documents. They led us out through the gates to the Mogilev highway and told us to go quickly and keep going without stopping. We did that. We walked all night, and in the morning, we went into the forest to sleep.

In this group with me was my friend Lucy Beguze, Aaron Weil, Sarah Khaikin, and other female students. Exhausted from walking, I immediately fell asleep. When I woke up, I saw only a boy, and nobody else. The boy was the younger brother of a student from Bobruisk, who came to visit his sister in Minsk. I woke him up, explained what had happened, and asked him to go to the house, which was visible not far away and find out if his sister and other students were there.

I thought that if a little Russian boy came to the house it would be safer. The boy went to the house, but very quickly returned. He said that the people in the house had turned him away saying: "Do you want all of us to get killed?"

We left and started walking, but since the planes were flying very low and dropping bombs, I suggested that we hide in a bush by the side of the road and wait for evening to come, and then go, but he didn't want to do this. We started walking in the ditch along the road and when airplanes flew by, we lay down on the ground.

Suddenly, much to our good luck, a cargo military vehicle stopped nearby, and I asked the soldier for a ride. The soldier put us in the back, passed us a piece of bread and the car rushed on. After some time, the car stopped, and we were dropped off. The soldier said: "We are not going further, why did you not ask where we were taking you? And weren't you afraid to sit with us?" I told him that when I saw he was in the Red Army I was no longer scared. [*I wonder if this is how she learned to present the story in the Soviet Union or if this this truly how she felt at the time.*] The soldier showed us how to get to the train station.

The station was crowded. I heard somebody call my name. It turned out to be my friend Tsilya Leybman with her mother and younger brother. They left Minsk on the first day of the war and now they were heading back. I explained to them that Minsk was on fire and that the Germans were approaching. Then they decided to go to Mogilev. And the boy I'd been travelling with decided he wanted to go to his parents' house in Bobruisk. We went between the trains, asking the workers where they were headed. We learned that one of the trains was going to Bobruisk and the boy decided to go on that freight car, so we said goodbye and parted.

My friend and I were looking for a train that was headed to Mogilyov or Gomel. My friend's mom invited me to go with them to Mogilyov. I do not know why, but I decided to go to Gomel and from there to Moscow to be with my relatives [*Did this save her? I can't imagine making this decision. I wonder if the choice felt arbitrary at the time, or if she felt guided toward it in some way.*] There was a feeling of unrest at the station, as we boarded a freight train headed towards Gomel. We were bombed several times on the way. The train would stop, and we'd all have to get out of the cars and lie down on the ground, then climb back in and keep going. It was not easy and it was very scary. [*I can picture them all, lying in the dust in their summer dresses, getting on and off the freight trains, shaking.*]

On the way, I said goodbye to my friend, her mother and brother. I did not know then that it would be forever. In Gomel, at the station I found a train to Moscow. I lay down on a top shelf and instantly fell into a deep sleep.

On July 3, our train arrived, but instead of Moscow it arrived at the station Mikhailovka, Stalingrad region. [*It's about 1,000 km south.*] Here we were greeted as evacuees, fed, taken to a bathhouse and then carted off to the collective farm.

I was put in a room at the collective farm with a young woman and her little boy. They immediately put us to work on a plantation near the river, where they grew various vegetables. In August and September, I worked in the field, harvesting grain. I worked all day there, they'd bring us lunch: dumplings, bread, tea. That's how we lived. We worked and wrote letters, searching for our loved ones. This was the summer, it was hot, and you could go barefoot.

I wrote to my relatives in Moscow and found out my mom's younger sister had come to Bashkortostan and I received her address. I immediately wrote to her and learned that of all our relatives, she, by pure chance, had managed to leave the city, and now was happy to help me. Since she was going to be called up by the army [*she was a nurse*], she promised to leave her coat and dress for me with her friends from the hospital and they would help me. Since I had no warm clothes and it was already autumn, I decided to go to my aunt in Bashkortostan.

On the collective farm, they gave me some flour and honey for my work there. Nobody objected to my departure. The leadership and the collective farmers saw that I had nothing, no warm clothes or shoes and I wouldn't be able to withstand the winter. There was nothing for me there, especially since the Germans were advancing.

After great difficulties, but thanks to the many good people I met on my way, I managed to get to Bashkortostan, to my aunt, who was only 28 years old. I remember and tell my loved ones about everyone who helped me along the way.

Yes, I must say that back then there were other people, better than now, they empathized with our situation and tried to help. I've always remembered this and this is how I taught my son and loved ones to be. [*This way of thinking about "the good old days" is completely baffling to me. I understand the gratitude she felt toward the people who helped her, and that extreme situations can bring out extreme kindness, but how could she say people were better in the context of the horrible atrocities that were happening? How can people have been better when Nazis were gassing her relatives, turning people's skin into lampshades, performing science experiments on children? How do you live through this kind of evil and not come to the conclusion that people, overall, have gotten worse? It's almost as though she thinks of the war as a natural disaster as opposed to a series of man-made decisions.*]

When I arrived at Bashkortostan and started working, I wrote to Buguruslan, looking for my relatives and friends. I didn't find Lucy Beguze and knew nothing about her fate. Unfortunately, only in 1990, when I was visiting Israel did I get the phone numbers of some of my classmates from Minsk. I found out that all those years, Lucy Beguze had been living in Brest and had just died a year earlier. So I never found out the answer to what happened, why had they left us in the woods, why had a sister left her brother and ran away. Perhaps the situation forced them to flee, and we had slept peacefully through it, not suspecting a thing.

[For years my grandmother searched and searched for her family. She heard that they had died during the evacuation, in a bombing. Their names had not appeared on any lists though, and so she held out hope for a very long time that someone had survived. Stories like this were possible. She had a friend who found out her younger brother had survived and became the president of Israel. Could my grandmother's older sister be alive somewhere, working as a seamstress? Or her younger brothers, who'd once run so wild their mother fed them dinner in their sleep, could they have grown up into adult men? Even though it was unlikely, I think she held on to that hope until the end.]