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# *Daughter of the Shtetl*

The Memoirs  
of Doba-Mera  
Medvedeva

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## **Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and Their Legacy**

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Translated by  
ALICE NAKHIMOVSKY  
Edited and introduced by  
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and ALICE NAKHIMOVSKY

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Translator's Note	viii
My Babushka and Her Memoirs <i>Michael Beizer</i>	1
A Unique Memoirist in Turbulent Times <i>Alice Nakhimovsky</i>	9
A Diary of My Days <i>Doba-Mera Izrailevna Medvedeva (Gurevich)</i>	29
Index	147

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# Translator's Note

Because the notebooks are in Russian, and Doba-Mera herself wrote Yiddish names in the Russian manner, that is how they appear in English: for example, Girsh, not Hirsch, and Meilakh, not Meylakh. Sometimes she Russified names, and sometimes not; sometimes one half of a double name will be Russian and the other half more or less Yiddish—for example, Izrail'-Vel'ka. Doba-Mera was a real-life speaker negotiating language borders without being aware that she was engaged in a linguistic enterprise. We follow her choices. Transliterations are Library of Congress, with the exception of familiar names like Kerensky, which are spelled as they would be in a newspaper.



# My Babushka and Her Memoirs

Michael Beizer

My maternal grandmother, Doba-Mera (Miriam) Medvedeva, née Gurevich, was born on the twenty-fifth of Heshvan, 5655 according to the Jewish calendar—November 15, 1892—in the shtetl of Khotimsk, in Klimovichi District of Mogilev Province (*guberniia*).<sup>1</sup> Doba-Mera was the daughter of an Enlightenment-influenced *melamed* named Izrail’-Vel’ka (Vol’f; 1865–1909) and his wife, Rokhl’-Leah Ben’iaminovna (née Medvedeva; 1868–1903). A *melamed* was a children’s teacher in the traditional system of religious education, but in the only remaining photograph we see Izrail’-Vel’ka in European clothing and without a head covering.

Seventy percent of the shtetl’s three thousand inhabitants were Jews. Evgenii Shifrin, from Klimovichi, put it this way: “A hundred years ago the trains bypassed Khotimsk, and they still do, as though Khotimsk were the edge of the earth, which may in fact be the case.”<sup>2</sup> According to Liubov’ Khazanova, who lived in Khotimsk in the 1920s: “It was a small town with single-story wooden houses. Very occasionally you’d see a brick one, but two-story houses were altogether only a handful. In the center was the market square, which had a big church; the synagogue was on a side street. The nearest railway station was in Kosiukovich, a city thirty-five kilometers away.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Here and elsewhere, dates before 1918, when Russia switched to the Gregorian calendar, are given in Old Style—that is, according to the Julian calendar.

2 Quoted in Aleksandr Litin, “Mestechki Mogilevshchiny—ot evreiskoi unikal’nosti k polnomu zabveniiu” [The shtetelach of the Mogilev region, from Jewish uniqueness to total oblivion], in *Istoriia mogilevskogo evreistva: Dokumenty i liudi* [A history of the Mogilev Jews: Documents and people] (Minsk: Iunipak, 2006), 2:263.

3 Liubov’ Solomonovna Khazanova, “Vospominaniia o rode Khazanovykh” [Recollections of the Khazanov family], manuscript; collection of the author.

Grandmother's father came from an ancient rabbinical line, the Syrkins, which includes the well-known Talmudist Yoel Sirkis (the Bach, 1561–1640) of Lublin, the author of *Bayit Chadash* (New House). As the family's second son, Izrail'-Vel'ka was fictively ascribed to a different family, the Gureviches. The Gurevich family had no other sons, which guaranteed that when Izrail'-Vel'ka reached draft age, he would get the exemption for only sons.

My grandmother's maternal great-grandfather, Khayim Yankel Medvedev, was registered in the 1811 census (revision list) as a twenty-nine-year-old town dweller of the city of Surazh, Chernigov Province.<sup>4</sup> His son Ben'iamin, born in 1821, was the father of my grandmother's mother. Ben'iamin had a wife named Rivka and eight children, the seventh of whom was Rokhl'-Leah. He lived in the village of Vlazovichy in Surazh District and was a man of some wealth. He had his own house and land and leased the estates of the merchant Golovin and the country squire (*pomeshchik*) Iskritskii, in whose house he settled his eldest son, Berka, and family. He kept an inn and engaged in farming. There were no Talmud scholars in their line.<sup>5</sup> Doba-Mera was only eleven years old when she lost her mother and sixteen when she lost her father. There had been no money to send her to the *gymnasium* (Russian preparatory school with a classical curriculum). The only school she ever attended was her father's *heder* (religious primary school), where she studied alongside boys. This was unusual but not impossible at that time in Lithuania and Belorussia.<sup>6</sup> As a little girl, she was profoundly distressed by her position as an outcast and her inability to get an education. In addition, from childhood on she performed burdensome household tasks for a variety of families. Everywhere she encountered extreme need, illness, greed, and wretchedness; very rarely, human kindness and sympathy. She lived through the revolution of 1905 and two pogroms and participated in illegal revolutionary activities. "I had no childhood, only years during which I was a child," she wrote many years later.

Because her father remarried and her stepmother had no love for the children from his first marriage, Doba-Mera was sent from one family of strangers to another. The year before her father's death she was taken on as part-relative,

4 State Archive of Briansk Province (GABO), *fond* (collection) 549, *opis'* (inventory) 2, *delo* (folder) 3, *listy* (pages) 153–54. Hereafter abbreviated, according to Russian convention, as f., op., d., and l. (singular) or ll. (plural).

5 State Archive of Chernigov Province, f. 127, op. 14, d. 4324, ll. 49–50.

6 Avraham Greenbaum, "The Girls' Heder and Girls in the Boys' Heder in Eastern Europe before World War I," *East/West Education* 18, no. 1 (1997): 55–62.

part-servant by her father's stepsister Gesia Belkina, who lived in Klinttsy.<sup>7</sup> All this time, she was also responsible for her younger brother, Avrom-Yudl (Abram; 1894–1963). Her other brother, David (1902–1907), died in childhood. In 1910, at the age of seventeen, she married her second cousin—my grandfather, Meilakh Medvedev—who had been born on October 1 (29 Heshvan), 1890.<sup>8</sup> Meilakh's father, a *meshchanin* from Surazh by the name of Yankel-Moyshe (Iakov-Meisha) Berkovich (son of Berka [Borukh], 1868?–1914) Medvedev, opposed his son's marriage to a girl without a dowry.<sup>9</sup> Although he would not permit an engagement, he consented to have the orphaned girl live with the family, hoping this would quickly extinguish his son's love. If the marriage had not taken place, the young girl's reputation might have been ruined.<sup>10</sup> Formally it all ended well: the young couple married, had six children, and lived together for sixty-two years. But the trauma was not forgotten, and it is reflected in the memoirs, even though in Doba-Mera's circle things of this sort were supposed to remain unmentioned.

In the 1920s Grandfather kept a bakery in Klinttsy and was therefore classified as a *lishenets* with limited civil rights.<sup>11</sup> After the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP), he, Grandmother, and their six children moved

7 The settlement of Klinttsy was founded in 1707 by runaway sectarian (Old Believer) peasants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was part of Surazh District, Chernigov Province. According to the 1897 census, it had a population of 12,166, of whom 2,605 were Jews. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it supported seven large factories, one industrial plant, and up to a hundred small businesses. The town had three hospitals, five churches, three synagogues, sixteen elementary and high schools, including two gymnasiums and a technical school. It had a railway station, a diesel-powered electricity plant, a post office building with telephone and telegraph, two cinemas, two printing presses, a public library, and a newspaper, *Klintsovskaia gazeta* (<http://klincy.narod.ru/chronicler.htm>).

8 GABO, f. 585, op. 1, d. 1, l. 144.

9 A *meshchanin* in imperial Russia was a city dweller belonging to a taxable estate consisting of property owners, artisans, and merchants.

10 On Jewish marriage customs and the problems faced by Jewish brides in Russia, see ChaeRan Y. Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), esp. chap. 1, "Creating the Jewish Family," 11–72.

11 The category *lishenets* (pl. *lishentsy*—a person deprived of something) first appeared in article 65 of the 1918 Soviet Constitution, in which "exploiters, people of the Church," and other representatives of the "old order" were deprived of the right to vote. With time, the category came to include artisans who employed even a single person, and together with the right to vote, *lishentsy* lost other fundamental rights, including those of free medical care, education, municipal housing, and registration in the labor market. Because of the specific pattern of Jewish employment (in trade and crafts), the percentage of *lishentsy* among them was particularly high.

from Klinttsy to Leningrad.<sup>12</sup> It happened in the early 1930s. Only there, after the required period spent working in a factory and after enrollment in *rabfak* (workers' education courses), could the children of a *lishenets* count on obtaining a higher education. The grandparents themselves had no such opportunity to get an education. Grandfather worked as a transportation coordinator for the Lenin's Spark Leningrad Battery Works; Grandmother kept house and raised the children. My mother Rokhlya-Lea (Rakhil') was born in the revolutionary year 1917.<sup>13</sup> She was the third child. No sooner had she graduated from a high school for pharmacy than the Soviet-Finnish War broke out and she was sent to the front.<sup>14</sup> She and my father registered their marriage in the "liberated" city of Vyborg.

In 1939, at the age of forty-seven, Grandmother decided that she had seen enough of life to begin a memoir. When she finished, she destroyed her account of the interwar Soviet period, which is a great pity but hardly surprising, if one considers the terrifying nature of those years for all of Leningrad.<sup>15</sup> In addition, why remind the children that Papa had been a *lishenets* and had been "purged" from the Party? Better to end with a story of how he baked bread for the army of General Shchors.<sup>16</sup>

12 The New Economic Policy was a partial retreat from War Communism in favor of a market economy.

13 Rakhil' (Rokhlya-Lea) Beizer (Medvedeva) (August 3, 1917, Klinttsy–December 15, 2004, Jerusalem), GABO, f. 585, op. 1, d. 3, l. 346.

14 According to the August 1939 agreement between Germany and the USSR (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), Finland was part of the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet government made territorial demands on the Finnish government and, when these were rejected, began military action in November 1939. In March 1940, after disproportionately heavy losses, the Red Army occupied Karelia and Vyborg, Finland's second largest city, which convinced Finland to sign a peace treaty.

15 The murder of Sergei M. Kirov, the first secretary of the Leningrad regional party organization on December 1, 1934, was followed by mass arrests, executions, and forced exiles, as a result of which the city's population diminished by thirty to forty thousand people. Even more mass repressions followed in 1937 and 1938.

16 In the Soviet historical literature, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Shchors (1895–1919) was a legendary commander of the Red Army and a hero of the Civil War. The Bohunsky Regiment of the First Ukrainian Soviet Division was formed under his command in September 1818 in the Unecha region, thirty-two kilometers from Klinttsy. It was then that Shchors married Fruma Efimovna Rostova-Shchors (née Khaikina), from Unecha. On August 30, 1919, in the course of a battle against Denikin's White Army, Shchors was killed by a shot from behind at close range, probably delivered by Pavel Tankhil'-Tankhilevich, a representative of the Twelfth Army Revolutionary Military Council, acting on Leon Trotsky's orders.

It is worth pointing out that few people in the Soviet era had the courage to keep a diary or write memoirs, and those who did, as a rule, destroyed them. Such was the case with Grandmother's Khotimsk contemporary Mendel Khazanov (1890–1954). In the postwar years he started to write his memoirs, but he destroyed them in 1951 in the midst of a state-sponsored anti-Semitic campaign. “That’s what all honorable people did then,” explained his son, “because if the writer was arrested, then everybody mentioned in the memoir would end up in the cross-hairs of the security police.”<sup>17</sup>

During World War II, in evacuation first in Orsk and later in Cheremkhovo, a coal mining town to the west of Lake Baikal, Grandmother gradually returned to religion. According to family legend, she vowed that she would observe the mitzvot (commandments) if her sons and sons-in-law returned safely from the front. And they did, although they were wounded (my father lost his arm). In the years of the Thaw, she again took up her memoirs, describing her impressions of the Finnish War and the first years of evacuation. Then, in 1958, she began a diary in which she described her golden wedding anniversary and her complicated relations with her children and husband.

I remember Grandmother and Grandfather's wooden house in Levashovo, a settlement outside Leningrad, where they moved after Grandpa retired in 1952, and where we often spent the summer. None of us grandchildren knew that the impenetrable green fence in the woods, which we were forbidden even to peek through, surrounded a former execution and burial site for twenty-eight thousand “enemies of the people.”<sup>18</sup>

The house had no modern conveniences such as running water or a sewerage system. To get water, you had to take a bucket to the well. The grandchildren were kept away from the street for fear of rowdy anti-Semitic teenagers. As I now understand, both in the way it looked (dilapidated and neglected, with its tilted-over fence, its vegetable garden, its chickens, and, until Khrushchev forbade it, its resident female goat) and the kind of life that reigned there (Yiddish, kosher, the eternal quarrels and mutual support within a single large family that included at times not only cousins but second cousins)—that house in many ways was a remnant of the shtetl, accidentally transported to the outskirts of Leningrad and preserved right up until the 1970s.

17 Aleksandr Mendelevich Khazanov, “Memory,” written in the United States, 2009; collection of the author.

18 Michael Beizer, *Evrei Leningrada 1917–1939: Natsional'naia zhizn' i sovetizatsiia* [The Jews of Leningrad, 1917–1939: National life and Sovietization] (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury, 1999), 124–25.

This is how my older sister Tema remembers what happened with the goat: “Grandma hid one goat, but it bleated, and the neighbors informed on her. So up drove a black truck, and two men got out and asked Grandma, ‘Where is your large horned piece of livestock?’ ‘Grandma stood in their path: ‘Shoot me! I’m not handing over the goat.’ But they didn’t obey her. So we lost our goat milk, and it was five liters.”<sup>19</sup> Grandmother was the main repository of tradition in our family. In addition to regular dishes, she kept separate kosher dishes for herself. On Friday nights candles were lit. Grandfather, a member of the Communist Party, prayed in a fraying *tales*, with *tfilin* (a new *tales* was impossible to get). He attended an illegal minyan (prayer group) in nearby Pargolovo, and sometimes went to the single working synagogue in Leningrad, which had 170,000 Jews—the Choral Synagogue on Lermontovskii Prospekt. On the doorpost of their bedroom was a mezuzah, which my cousin, Grandmother’s beloved Venia—the only one of the younger grandsons who was circumcised—had to kiss before his violin examinations. What else could a Jewish child be expected to study? For Pesach Grandmother managed to collect together all or at least most of the family, including the Russian wife and Russian husband of two of her children, as well as thirteen grandchildren. So that we would all fit around the holiday table in the small dining room, they had to hold two seders. Of course, the dishes were special, Passover ones, and the wine was home-made, from raisins that were kosher for Passover. Grandmother gave us *tsimes* and *imberlakh* and made us listen to the Haggadah from beginning to end, together with her Russian commentary. In the early 1960s, when it was not possible to bake matzo in the synagogue, Grandmother baked it herself on the big kitchen stove that was heated with wood.

From time to time, Grandmother would try to teach us grandchildren the Hebrew alphabet and acquaint us with the important stories of the *Chumash* (the five books of Moses). Her “obscurantism” was vigorously resisted by the atheist children. Nonetheless, it was from her that I heard for the first time about the prophet Moses and the marvelous Joseph. When Grandmother and Grandfather died, she on the twenty-fourth of Adar, 5736 (February 25, 1976), and he in 1980, a whole trunk of *sifrei kodesh* (holy books) remained on their upper-floor balcony. The books had been brought to them by the children of old people who had died in Levashovo and Pargolovo.

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19 The notes of Tema Slobodinskaia, 2007; personal archive of Michael Beizer.

My grandmother's memoirs survived the evacuation and were discovered by Aunt Ida, Venia's mother, who inherited the house in Levashovo.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2001, a few months before her death, during my visit to St. Petersburg, Ida gave me Grandmother's notebooks. She apparently felt that, as an Israeli historian, I was the most appropriate repository of family history.

In addition to being an important family document, the memoirs, in my opinion, also have historical value. As far as I know, these memoirs of a Lithuanian-Belorussian Jewish shtetl at the turn of the twentieth century—written by a poor, uneducated woman—are very unusual. Just as unusual is the power of her writing. Seen through the eyes of this unfortunate girl, shtetl life loses the romantic aura ascribed to it by people who had good lives there, as well as by postwar scholars carried away by nostalgia.<sup>21</sup> It is striking how a simple woman with no conception of feminism understood herself as a strong personality with things to say, whose experience could prove useful to her descendants. Her native intelligence and awareness are impressive.

Two ways of viewing life come together in Doba-Mera's memoirs: on the one hand, her tendency to present herself as a victim of circumstances—characteristic of women, orphans, representatives of discriminated-against minorities, and immigrants—and on the other, her emphatic determination to realize her right to a normal life. One can see in the memoirs a tendency to take revenge—although after the fact and in written form—against those who have offended her. The reader gets the impression that Doba-Mera's frequent changes in her place of work and her participation in revolutionary activity were attempts to escape loneliness and acquire a circle of friends who might take the place of a family. Unfortunately, she was unable to do this before her marriage, and the marriage itself was not a very good one, at least in her estimation.

The text of the memoirs had to be edited to make it easily readable. Russian was not, after all, Doba-Mera's native language, but she avoided writing in Yiddish, seeing that it was going out of use. Certainly the narrative devices at Grandmother's disposal were limited; she depended on ideas and patterns of expression common in her society and in the mass media. It is no accident that in his book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Paul John Eakin

20 Ida (Eidlia) Meilakhovna Medvedeva (December 1, 1924, Klintys–September 5, 2002, St. Petersburg).

21 In this sense, the present text is the complete opposite of the memoirs of Pauline Wengeroff (*Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010))

asks, “How much of what autobiographers say they experience is equivalent to what they really experience, and how much of it is merely what they know how to say?”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, autobiography is not fiction; it is not completely made up, as some deconstructionists imagine. In the case of a naive writer like Doba-Mera Medvedeva, the notion of autobiography as fiction is even less relevant. Presented from the point of view of an outcast, put through the prism of traditional shtetl culture with its sprinkling of “class consciousness” and atheism, filtered through self-censorship and ideas of morality, her memoirs are nonetheless—discounting only her repetition of rumors that she could not verify—based on the real facts of her own life. They may help us to rethink our ideas about the Jewish shtetl in the Pale of Settlement.

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22 Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 4.