

Maya's Story

Originating Country: Russia

Originating City: Birobidzhan

Immigrated to the U.S.: September 30, 1995

City: Chicago

State: Illinois

I was born in Ukraine in the 1960s and while growing up I did not know much about my family. My nuclear family was small- my Mom, Dad and myself. Four years later my sister Natasha was born. I knew that my Dad always wanted a boy. His Father, a World War II hero, died in 1956 because of severe wounds he suffered and the lack of sufficient medical help. His name was Moisey; so, eventually my Dad was looking for a name that reminded him about his Father and that is how I became Maya. My sister Natasha also was named after my Dad's younger brother, who died when he was very young from food poisoning. Very early I learned that newborns in my family as well as in our tradition receive their names after people who died, perished or disappeared to continue their legacy and have a better fortune. I was told that people who left us watch over us from above.

I also learned that my Mom had 5 brothers and 2 sisters. I learned that somewhere far away in Far East of Russia I had more than a dozen cousins, uncles and aunts. I knew they lived in a small town called Birobidzhan and this is a very symbolic place in Jewish history. Jewish volunteers from around the world built this city in the Far East woods in the beginning of the last century. They wanted to have their own Jewish state, no matter where and at what price. It was long before Israel became a state. Stalin, the Soviet leader at that time, called upon Jews to build this city and later he and his government decided that these newcomers threatened the Soviet people by having too much influence from abroad. Stalin proclaimed that all Americans, Poles, Brazilians, Argentines, Germans, and Romanian Jews who came to build Birobidzhan were foreign spies, and sent them to trials and labor camps or prisons. Many could not survive; and those who survived were not allowed to leave Soviet Union and stayed there forever. The Soviet people who were close friends with foreigners were sent to labor camps as punishment as well...

My Grandfather Zachar was friendly with lots of people who were called enemies of the state and served in the labor camps. During World War II Grandpa Zachar was in the Soviet Army. He was lucky to survive many battles and came home as one of many Jewish heroes. Grandfather Zachar came to Birobidzhan from Ukraine after WWII, together with his wife, Elizaveta, and their 6 children at the time. They were working on the farm providing food for those who build the town I later lived in.

Life after the war was tough, Grandpa Zachar was glad to accept any job he could, so he could feed his growing family. He was a farmer, then one of the "kolkhoz" leaders. Zachar was an easy going man and quickly made friends with some foreigners - American and Argentine Jews who came to build a Jewish State in the Far East woods. Sure enough, he was convicted of friendship with foreigners and expelled from the Communist party as well as from his high position at the local "kolkhoz."

The first time I saw my Grandfather Zachar, Grandma Liza, and all my other relatives, I was 7 years old. We traveled seven days by train from Kiev, Ukraine, to Birobidzhan, Russia. It was December and the Far East had an extremely cold winter with snow up to a meter high, coupled with strong winds. I remember we came for a New Year celebration. There were introductions, presents, long family dinners and lots of fun. Grandpa had so many war-time medals that his best jacket could not hold them all. He served 5 years in the army during World War II, but he never shared war stories with his kids or grandchildren. I understood if Grandpa does not want to share, he has his own reasons.

There are still so many things I wanted to learn: I started noticing that my Mom has a sister Bella that looks like her twin. They even talked alike and even were wearing the same style hairdo. Living ten thousand kilometers apart could not change that. I also noticed that all Mom's brothers had lots of reddish curly hair like Grandma Liza had, and their sense of humor was absolutely like Grandpa's. I have learned that there are some recipes that my Mom used to cook back home, in Ukraine, but they were not her original recipes; her Mom cooked with the same taste, same ingredients, just bigger portions. As a child I never saw pots so big in my life, and also never saw a table so big in one small room. There was a dining room: a table and nothing more, just many, many pictures on the walls.

My memories hold that holiday visit as a special treasure. Perhaps today it is even more meaningful than before since I am apart from my big wonderful family once again.

Back in Ukraine my Dad's family consisted of his brother with children and two sisters with their families. They made the difficult decision to leave a country. I was too young to understand what it means to be "refuznik." Why people who are practicing Judaism were refused a place to work, an opportunity for their kids to go to college and many other forms of discrimination. I did not understand either why knowing your culture and traditions were considered to be a wrongdoing and against the Communist party.

I had so many questions, and I could not get answers from anybody. Looking back, I realize, I was protected from too much information and knowledge. I understand better today because I use the same rules when I think about what

I should tell my kids and what should I explain to them later when they become older.

One day, after years and years of protests in "Let my people go" campaign, my aunts and their families finally received the permission they dreamed of - to go to America. I remember the train station, lots of people: some were scared, some looked hopeful, and all of them had red and tired eyes... Were they crying? Why were these adults crying anyway?

Perhaps my aunts and their families did not open America as Columbus did, but they were first in my extended family to disagree with mainstream culture and say "No" to discrimination and anti-Semitism. My Dad and Mom were not that brave at the time, so instead of going to America too, they moved to Birobidzhan closer to the family. The Soviet propaganda claimed that Birobidzhan would be the place where discrimination or persecution because of race, nationality or religious beliefs would not exist. We believed in it.

Finally, I got to know all my family members on my Mom's side very well. My Grandma was the only girl in her family; her education wasn't her Father's priority, and her stepmother did not care much either. She was looking more for opportunity to educate her two sons, my Grandma's stepbrothers. Grandpa grew up in the orphanage; he did not know when or what happened to his parents. When he was 16 years old, the orphanage sent him to work and he did not have a chance to get a college education. Still, both of them put a high priority on learning throughout all their life. My Grandma subscribed to all possible magazines in the country when books were a privilege of Communist Party members only; she was not one of them but she loved to read. Being a Mom to eight children, and having fourteen grandchildren later in life, she had lots of knowledge and wisdom to share with everyone, but the one thing she was desperate to share: that education is a key to success. That's why all my uncles and aunts are college-educated people, even though for Jewish people in the former Soviet Union the 5% quota to get to the college existed until "Perestroika".

I graduated from high school when I was seventeen, and went to Far East State University - hundreds of miles away from my home, to study Journalism. I was young and eager to conquer the World, and I believed that writing about people's life was essential and rewarding. Ten years in the field proved me right: I was documenting not only people's lives, but how the world was affecting everything we do. My articles were noticed. My TV programs were the talk of the city. Until one day I became a refugee...

My relatives in Chicago contacted HIAS Chicago: papers were signed, we were interviewed in Moscow and got a status. We gave away our personal things... and with two suit bags crossed the globe.

Even though it is hard to observe from across the globe - we saw the difference of how people live. So after 20 years in Birobidzhan, I left. I left Russia with my husband Alex and son Arthur. We left for the same reason my aunts and their families left Ukraine many years ago - for better opportunities that are lost in the state where anti-Semitism is tolerated and even encouraged on every level of the state... One after another all my maternal relatives left Birobidzhan too, all of them moved to Israel, from the city that their parents and grandparents built as the prototype of Israel - to the real one.

Interestingly enough, HIAS Chicago not only brought me here, but became my new workplace, my passion, and my world. I started to work at HIAS Chicago as a case worker in 1997 and even though I never even heard or experienced social services before I left, I felt comfortable in my new role. I thought that somebody could cry your heart out to a friend or stranger, but not to someone called a "social worker," yet I quickly changed my opinion. I started as a case worker, then became a Community Outreach Liaison, someone who brings voice to the community and helps understand important information. Working in the world of refugees and immigrants, I felt more than ever that I have developed interests that may have nothing to do with my undergraduate education in journalism but rather more importantly in community building and counseling. I knew I wanted to gain the necessary training and knowledge for advancement in my new field. So I started a Master's program at Argosy University and in 2010 graduated with Master of Arts in Community Counseling and got my license as a professional counselor. I still work for HIAS Chicago as well as Jewish Child and Family Services, giving back to the community who once helped resettle me and my family.

My family is big and loud, and all over the world. We have our internal conflicts, financial struggles and language barriers - we have it all, but most importantly over the years and over long distances, we manage to save our roots and our memories for new generations to come. We are also thankful to HIAS Chicago who helped some of us become reunited together.