

VERA STERN

VILNA! A magic place and time in our history – anybody originating in Vilna has a certain aura. I am proud to count my grandfather Gershon Wirshubsky and his wife Rosa Chaskes among them. The whole family was born in Vilna, while it was under the Russian regime, and therefore Russian was their language.

Gershon and Rosa had three children in Vilna: my mother, Emma, and my uncles Grisha and Max-Mendel. My mother married Misha Lindenblit. Grisha's wife was Helen, and Max married Sabina. Grandfather Gershon was Orthodox, but he was tolerant toward his children, who did not observe kashrut.

At the time of the Revolution in 1917, part of the family left Vilna for Leipzig where they established a successful fur business. My parents managed to move to Moscow, where my sister Meri was born.

Four years later my parents and Meri rejoined the family in Leipzig, and later moved to Berlin, where I was born. In Germany we were considered to be Lithuanian citizens because we were from Vilna, so we were protected as foreigners. Yet in 1938, as the situation became more dangerous, my father was able to get us French visas and we left Berlin for Paris with only a few suitcases.

The Second World War started, but my parents were reluctant to move again, so we stayed in Paris. My sister Meri managed to leave for America on the Russian quota, because she was born in Moscow. The rest of the family dispersed, too: my grandfather went to Basel; Grisha and Helen and their son Tolly moved to Sweden; Max, Sabina and Mordechai went to Palestine.

In 1943 my uncle Grisha helped me come to Stockholm, through the efforts of the then Swedish Consul General, Raoul Nordling. Tolly served in the British Brigade in Palestine. My father Misha was arrested in Paris and sent to Auschwitz, never to return. My mother and I immigrated to New York in 1947.

That summer I got a job at the United Nations working in the mail room. Shortly after, I was upgraded to working for the Director of the Language Department. My knowledge of languages—Russian, French, Yiddish, Swedish and English—was a key to making this possible.

I continued working at the United Nations until 1951, when I finally reached my dream of going to Israel. There I met Isaac Stern, my future husband. We were married and began a family back in the United States. Our daughter Shira, now a rabbi, has three sons. Our sons Michael, who has two daughters, and David, who also has two daughters, are both orchestra conductors.

As I write this short history of my family, I want to thank my friend Ella Levine and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research for making it possible for me to preserve my personal family story here at YIVO, and for helping to ensure continuity – so that our shared history will always be here for current and future generations to learn about, study, celebrate and build upon.