

## Book Eight

# Exodus. Flight from Kiev.



Baba Anya and Deda Vench  
(Anna and Vasily).



Helen and children  
in Greece.





## INTRODUCTION

Book 8 of our family story covers their experiences from the beginning to the end of World War II, and subsequently to the end of the Greek Civil War and the voyage on the *Nea Hellas* to the US.

The twentieth century was one of the bloodiest in history. 70-85 million people died in World War II alone.

Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis, which lasted from June 22, 1941-December 5, 1941, took the Red Army by surprise, since Hitler and Stalin had previously signed a non-aggression agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Operation Barbarossa was considered the “largest and most powerful invasion force in human history.” (Britannica) The battles on the Eastern Front of the Second World War, which involved Ukraine, represent one of the largest military confrontations in history.

Fleeing from Soviet Kiev, passing through Nazi occupied Poland, escaping into the violent and failing Third Reich, shuttling in trucks and cattle cars through Italy, they landed in our father’s ancestral homeland of Greece just as the brutal Greek Civil War was beginning. After four more years of struggle, they managed to get to the West, in search of freedom and peace. They were trapped between two vicious dictators, Hitler and Stalin, and were trying to escape both.

This record contains excerpts from our parents’ and grandmother’s recollections of events. Recently opened archives and newly declassified documents support their version of events. Those interviews are taped and documented.

Throughout the escape our family’s greatest fear was capture or repatriation to the Soviet Union. Stalin looked upon refugees and those who had lived and worked under Nazi occupation as enemies to be imprisoned or put to death. This included people who were forcibly taken to the Reich during the war to be laborers (Ostarbeiters) and Soviet POW’s.

What is particularly striking is that during their dangerous and heartbreaking escape from Kiev, with no future in view, and survival hanging by a tiny historical thread, our mother was still able to appreciate a beautiful field of beets, a grey luminescent sky, and a well-tended flower garden.



Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis on June 22, 1941, took the Red Army by surprise, since Hitler and Stalin had previously signed a non-aggression pact, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Red Army was unprepared and overwhelmed and there were many casualties, including Peter’s close friend, Andryusha. Peter was also drafted into the army and witnessed that first day of war. (Photo credit: Operation Barbarossa Plan)

## CHAPTER 1

### **The war began for the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941**

Peter was drafted into the army. As a physician, he was sent to the second line. When Hitler attacked the USSR, the Red Army was unprepared, without food, guns, ammunition, or training. There were massive casualties. Complicating matters, Stalin had purged (killed) or imprisoned many experienced army officers prior to the war. Hitler and Stalin had signed a non-aggression pact, and Stalin refused to believe Hitler would move against him.

Peter's story (below) shows how their unit received no alert of the impending attack even four hours after the Soviet officers' quarters had been hit.

His good friend Andryusha had been drafted as an officer and was already at the front. Andryusha was not eager to fight, to say the least, as he himself had been a victim of Stalin's oppression and had been harassed, jailed and beaten before being released, then drafted to fight for the very same regime. Countless other Soviet citizens also felt this way. Andryusha wrote to Peter that they could see the German troops massing at the border. The war started June 22, 1941 at 5 am, though no word reached Peter's position until 9 am.

#### **The War Begins for Us. Peter's Story.**

• It was a summer morning and the weather was unusually pleasant. The air  
• was clear and warm at 9 a.m. with only an occasional white cloud floating  
• gently overhead.

• The birds in our Ukrainian woods were very active and filled the air with  
• their songs. I was lying lazily in a hammock stretched between two pine  
• trees enjoying the peaceful morning, not far from the Polish border in  
• Western Ukraine.

• About one week earlier our Red Army Infantry Division #196 was moved  
• close to the Polish border and ever since then we had nothing to do except  
• eat, rest and wait for something to happen. We all knew that war with  
• Germany was inevitable and would start soon, but strangely enough,  
• nobody worried about it. It seemed that as soon as we were drafted into the  
• armed forces, we just stopped thinking for ourselves. We left the thinking to  
• somebody else, usually the highest command of the army.

• I was a young, recently graduated physician with some surgical experience  
• and therefore assigned to the position of surgeon at the Division's Kiev  
• Hospital. So far there was no work for me here. All was quiet.

• Suddenly on this beautiful morning of June 22, 1941 everything changed.

The quiet of nature was shattered by the distant buzz of motors originating in the west, and gradually growing louder. It sounded like airplanes, but we were familiar with the sound of normal aircraft. This seemed very different.

None of us realized at the time that within minutes our lives would be transformed, turned upside down, and changed in such a way that nothing would ever be the same again.

Listening, a few of us officers and some of the peasant soldiers gathered together and exchanged opinions about the sound which was getting steadily louder and louder.

Most of us said it came from our own planes patrolling the area. But as they came overhead and the noise from the motors roared, we suddenly heard a series of whistling sounds followed by one deafening explosion after another nearby.

The bombing lasted no longer than a minute, but the destruction was heavy. A moment of silence followed, then someone spoke slowly but loudly, "The planes may sound like ours but the bombs are German!"

It was the beginning of the Great War in Russia, which took many millions of human lives and changed the world...From this time on there was no idle moment for us. I never used that hammock again and there was no time for rest.

The casualties flowed into our infirmary in a steady stream and I, together with another surgeon, a woman, attended up to 100 wounded during that one night.

I remember clearly even now after forty years the "black piles" near the entrance to our OR (operating room) tent. These were piles of little black capsules identifying the dead. Red Army soldiers used to carry their personal identification on a tiny rolled up strip of paper inserted into a small black plastic container not longer than about one and a half inches. Most other armies used metal tags worn on the soldier's necks. In the US these were called "dog tags." This black container, shaped like a capsule, contained identification to notify next of kin in case of death. It was kept in the pocket all the time and removed from one's body only when a soldier



Russian and German planes destroyed on the ground on June 22, 1941 as Operation Barbarossa began to push eastward into the Soviet Union. In the front is a Russian Polikarpov UTI-4 a two-seater training version of I-16 Soviet fighter. In the back a plane with German markings is likely Henschel Hs 126. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Image printed in the 60's from Polish Archive negative and distributed by the Archive, now in Marek Tuszyński's collection of WWII prints.

•  
•  
• was wounded or dead. In that case the ID paper was removed and the “black box” discarded.  
•  
•  
•

• It is hard to say whether I was right or wrong, but I got so mad, I threw away the paper and put Mom’s picture into the capsule. I still have the little picture. She must have been about 20 or so at the time. I did not get killed and the capsule with the picture of Mom arrived home with me (to the US). It is still here, kept as a souvenir.  
•  
•  
•

• The “black piles” at the door of our tent represented the plastic containers removed from the pockets of fallen soldiers. At times the pile was 1-2 feet high.  
•  
•  
•

Most armies used metal tags (“dog tags”) to identify a soldier and notify the family in case of death. The Red Army used a black container shaped like a large capsule, with personal identification written on a tiny rolled up paper inside. Peter describes the steady stream of casualties flowing into their infirmary, from the very first day of the war, June 22, 1941, and the growing pile of black capsules removed from the pockets of fallen soldiers. The pile grew to 1-2 feet high. Peter discarded his own ID papers and replaced them in the container with a photograph of his wife, Helen. He kept it until his own passing many years later, in Delaware, on July 15, 2006.



• Later we learned that the war with Russia did not start with us but started at 3:00 AM that day at the Polish border about 20 km to the west of our camp. Our troops were still sleeping in their barracks when the artillery fire hit them from a short distance.  
•  
•  
•

• For some reason we were not alerted to these hostilities by our forces and only learned of the bombing after the Germans attacked near our position. Andryusha, my good friend and nephew (second cousin in American) had been sent to the border and apparently no one knew what was going on—something that should never have been permitted.  
•  
•  
•

• The Germans started shooting artillery, which is normally shot over the soldier’s heads and behind the lines at the towns and villages. But they were so close that they were shooting directly into the barracks where the soldiers were.  
•  
•  
•

Unfortunately, Andryusha died there and I never saw him again. Not even his remains or his black box were ever found.

Peter's description of working in the field.

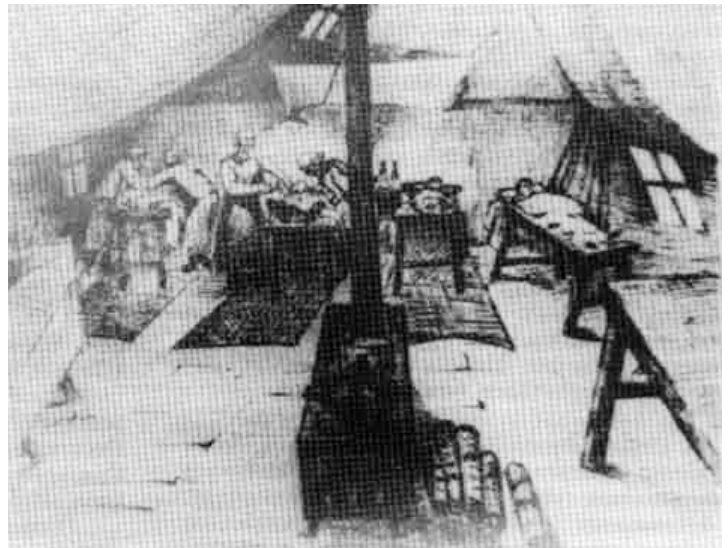
In the field hospital we had a tremendous number of patients. Frequently there were fifty for me and fifty for the other surgeon, a young woman. Work was really hard. Sometimes we started in the morning and worked the whole night through when battles took place at night...

Often, soldiers were brought to us having been shot in the left hand. Most of the time two or three fingers were completely smashed or destroyed. Unfortunately, the commanding officer grew suspicious and he investigated only to learn that these men were shooting their own hands off. We received an order, then, to notify of any gunshot wounds in the left hand.

Maybe only 6% of the population is left-handed. They shot their left hand so they could still use their right hands. These soldiers were removed from the operating tent and were lined up behind it. Some of them were shot right there. The rest were asked if they will fight for Russia and their beloved leader, Josef Stalin, and "all the socialist people of the world". In one loud voice, everybody screamed "YES!" The approval was unanimous. They cheered, "For Stalin, Hura!" and they were sent back to the front to continue the war.

The shooting behind the tent made everybody uneasy but there was nothing we could do about it.

One time a fellow was found in the woods who was not very young, maybe around 40. Somehow or other he raised the suspicions of our commanding officer. The officer brought him in to our tent, not because he needed treatment, but because he could not communicate with anyone there, apparently because he spoke some other language that no one understood.



These are photos of the outside and inside of the medsanbat (medical battalion) tents, which were very much like the field hospitals where Peter worked at the front, treating the wounded and identifying the dead. The caption indicates that the tent was located not far from the front lines.

I knew several languages so they brought him to me to try communicate with him and find out who he is and what he was doing there. I tried my best in several languages including French and German, but the fellow looked at me sheepishly and kept babbling nonsense in reply. I listened carefully to what he said and it did not sound like any language whatsoever. So, the officer was standing by and of course, his conclusion was that he was a spy and trying to avoid getting found out. The penalty for spying during the war was simple. He was taken back behind the tent and shot.

The Germans attacked the area. Of course, you never know who attacked whom. That is always a good question during this type of war. When they bombed the area, the bombs were falling not too far from us.

We were staying in heavily overgrown woods. I looked at one of our surgeons and I will never forget the picture which I saw. This young man had put a helmet on his head and he was lying on the ground with his fingers in his ears, in absolute horror until the attack finished. Well, I don't know. I don't like to say I am especially brave but that scene was so funny that I did not have a chance to get scared myself.

During that time we had to work very hard. All my life later I worked hard but that experience of working under stress helped me learn to concentrate upon what I was doing and not to worry about other things or to get distracted. Later on, the bombing attacks were never again directed at our positions, fortunately, but to the surrounding area. Even so, they never had any effect upon us.

Peter taught a group of military nurses. All his students in this photo died in the war. Nurses were located closer to the front than the physicians and were responsible for evacuating the wounded. As a result, they had higher casualties.





As a matter of fact, I remember one time when the big commander of the Red Army, who was in charge of several divisions, which is called "corps", came in for inspection and I went to show him the different tents which we had and the work we were doing. Just then a German airplane passed right overhead and I noticed with amusement that the general was somewhat nervous while I felt no reaction to the plane myself.

When the war started, the Red Army did not put physicians near the battle lines. The first place where the physicians were located was the regiment, which, of course, helped save a lot of physicians from being killed.

The battalion was closer to the front and each had one of those nurses with medical supplies and equipment. He was also responsible for helping to evacuate the wounded to the first aid location, apply first aid, and then transport the wounded to us. The nurses suffered a lot of wounds.

One case specifically remained in my memory. There was a young Russian man who was one of my former students. He was a nurse in a battalion and was hit with a slug in the chest. He was brought to our place, wounded this time, instead of himself transporting the wounded, in critical condition with a substantial hole in his chest.

These kinds of wounds are extremely serious. Now, many of them could be saved. At that time it was not possible. We did not have any transport to a medical center where a lifesaving operation could be performed. Our means were completely inadequate for his needs.

I bent up on him and tried to put occlusive dressing on his chest. He was getting weaker and weaker and then he turned to me. He recognized me of course. He said he has something to ask me. We got his documents out of the little black capsule and he asked that someone notify his mother that he is dead.

Shortly after that he died. That was a sad picture. You could look at that and never understand why that war was going on and why such massive destruction of young people. In total Russians lost about 20 million people during that war.

I did a lot of work and the officers "almost" appreciated it. A high-level commander visited the field hospital in the woods to see my work.

There were several big tents. German planes were continuously flying overhead and the Commander seemed nervous as he walked from tent to tent. That didn't bother me. I didn't notice anything while working. They

• were ready to give me an award, but the Secret Police (KGB) mentioned that  
• I had relatives in foreign countries and that would preclude any award. The  
• Commander left, and the offer of an award was dead due to the Secret Police.  
•



Doctors and nurses treating wounded soldiers at the field hospitals.



## The Retreat

Peter was in the Red Army for four months as it retreated from the Germans. The Red Army was in complete collapse. Bombs were dropping on them, and they were sprayed with machine gun bullets from lighter planes. Peter said, *there was one gun for every three soldiers.*

Prior to the war, Kievans had been living in the “AA”—“Hell” of Stalinism (as Helen describes it), and many felt no great loyalty to the regime that had oppressed, murdered, and imprisoned them. Andryusha, Peter’s close friend, had been harassed by the NKVD (KGB) throughout his young life, and was beaten, tortured, and imprisoned. Upon being released from prison, he was immediately drafted and died the first day of the war. Peter decided to take his chances escaping and try to get home to Kiev.

Peter describes the retreat.

- 
- When the Red Army started to retreat we had complete disorder, chaos...The
- roads were packed with soldiers, equipment and wagons, tanks and every-
- thing. The Germans understood this and from time to time they attacked
- the retreating soldiers from the air. The bombing was quite systematic and
- frequent... The situation in Ukraine was such that nobody knew anything
- about what was going on and who was where.
- 
- I decided that would be the best time to leave the Red Army and to get back
- home, if I could. There was a military nurse (a feldsher, or paramedic) with
- me who stuck with me because with my knowledge of German I could
- accomplish a lot. (Peter’s parents had him learn languages and German was
- the most popular foreign language in Ukraine at that time. He was fluent in
- German, which saved his life on more than one occasion). Well, we decided
- to go together. We left our division and took off through the villages toward
- home. Our first stop was in the morning near a small Ukrainian village. We
- entered a house where a woman in her forties greeted us in a very friendly
- manner— her son also was in the army. She fed us some food which we
- badly needed. I will never forget the chicken which she prepared. It was
- something fantastic for our hungry stomachs...
- 
- ...After that, we moved on further, and shortly we stumbled upon a village
- which was occupied by the German army. We decided to tell them that we
- were finished with the war. We still had our uniforms and our pistols with us.
- As soon as we learned from the villagers that the Germans were there I asked
- one of the villagers to get rid of our pistols. We did not plan to fight with
- anybody. A villager picked them up and buried them in a pile of manure...
- 
- ...We came to a village travelling by horse and buggy. I don’t recall now
- where we got it. We found a place to sleep. We usually slept in barns in
-



This is a picture of the cover of *Notes of a Young Doctor*, by Mikhail Bulgakov, who was a doctor himself. Peter admired Bulgakov's book of stories about being a newly graduated doctor out in the "boondocks," doing operations in primitive circumstances.

the hay or in abandoned buildings. Then a German officer came and woke us up. He said that there was a German soldier with a leg destroyed by an explosion and we will probably be needed to attend to him. I said we are ready any time. But as I got ready to go, he stopped me and said, "No. We would like our German surgeon to do the operation." Apparently, they were waiting for a German surgeon to arrive and we would be called only if he was held up. (Ukrainians were not supposed to operate on Germans, as they were "Untermenschen"—"inferior people.")

Well, that is the way the Germans were. I went back to sleep. They waited for the German surgeon. I did not see the patient during this time. They waited an hour, two, three, four, maybe five but he never arrived. They changed their minds and the officer came back to me and said they have given up on the surgeon's arrival, go ahead and do something.

They took us to a back room which had been converted into an improvised operating room. Some instruments were there from German medical supplies. Together with my nurse we proceeded with the operation. Some primitive anesthesia was given and this time, the difference was that I did not have any problem doing the operation like Bulgakov did. I had enough experience. (He is referring to Bulgakov's book, *Notes of a Young Doctor*).

Within a few minutes the leg was amputated at the level of the knee. Dressing was applied and the patient was moved to his bed. But unfortunately, there was no way to help him. No physiological solution was possible. He had lost a tremendous amount of blood and there was no blood to be found. We left him there, and a few hours later he died. Not nearly as pleasant an ending for the story as the Bulgakov story...

...Sometime later we were travelling again on the road when suddenly about midnight we were stopped by a group of German soldiers and an officer on horseback. I got out my handkerchief and waved it over my head to show that we were not going to fight. The conversation was not very pleasant in the beginning because we were wearing the Red Army uniform. They were not sure what we were doing and what we planned to do in this uniform in German occupied territory. They took us to the main village center to talk to their commanding officer, who brought us into his office. The first thing he told us was the exact division we were from and its number. This was before we had told him anything.

I was impressed. Apparently, their intelligence was well developed. Fortunately, I knew German quite fluently, and I told him that I finished an amputation on their soldier. That helped, but we were detained several days as prisoners of war...



Germans taking over a village.  
This is a scene such as Peter would have encountered during his months in the Red Army, and as he tried to get home to Kiev. 1941, Wikipedia.

...The officer (on horseback) opened his wallet and in it were about 7 red stars that he said were from the uniforms of prisoners he had taken. He asked us for ours and we were only too happy to part with them and contribute to his collection. They probably did him no good, even if he managed to make it back home to Germany later. Eventually, they let us go and we continued on our way.

...In the morning we arrived at a major village, which was probably a county seat. In the middle of this little town we were met by the officer on horseback who had stopped me during the night. It was a coincidence and rather peculiar. He looked at me and he immediately recognized me. I would not have recognized him. He laughed and said, "Doctor, good morning. I am glad to see you again because if it were not for your excellent knowledge of the German language, we would have killed you right there."

Well, I felt very happy about that. During this conversation bullets whizzed by us from different directions every few minutes. Of course, there was no way in hell to find out who was shooting at whom. That is the way war is. But we were all so used to that, including the German, they did not impress us in any way. We paid no attention to the bullets and they never hit us.

## The Homecoming

- 
- When I walked into the apartment it was quite a feeling. I walked in and
- everybody rushed to me. The first one to reach me was our dog which was
- so happy he was jumping up to my face to kiss me. Your mother had a white
- dress on. Everybody was happy. Our homecoming was fantastic.
- 

## The First Battle of Kiev—August 7 to September 26, 1941

When the German army finally took Kiev, many Kievans thought that this would be the end of their suffering under Stalin. Those who had positions in the Communist Party fled, many for the eastern territories. For those who stayed, hoping to see Stalin's defeat, they discovered that life under the Nazi occupation was another form of subjugation.

From *The New Yorker*, April 14, 2003: "In Koch's view (Koch, by his own admission a 'brutal dog' became Reichskommissar of Ukraine in 1942), ... a view shared by Hitler, the Ukrainians were primitive beings—half monkeys—who had to be 'handled with the whip, like the Negroes.' (Koch once declared, 'If I find a Ukrainian who is worthy of sitting at the same table with me, I must have him shot.') Under Koch's command, all schools above the fourth grade were closed, the city of Kiev was reduced to a state of near-starvation, and more than a million Ukrainians were sent to work—and often to perish—as slave laborers."

Story told by Helen Stavrakis.

- 
- I was working in the academy at the time. That was a month before the
- start of the war. Papa was already taken away into the army and we were
- awaiting the explosion of war. But no matter how you anticipate it when
- it finally comes it is a big blow. It was frightening. The mood on the street
- was nervous. You could see the police running around and the army moving
- from place to place. It was like living in a volcano. You knew it would erupt
- soon, but you did not know exactly when.
- 

History books generally refer to this as the Encirclement of Kiev and it is considered the largest such operation in the history of warfare in terms of numbers of men. Our mother and locals called it "the Siege of Kiev" and it lasted from August 7 to September 26, 1941, according to western sources and from July 7 to September 26, 1941 in Soviet history.

- 
- I was working as a junior scientist. The senior scientist was Kubisho, and
- it was a wonderful laboratory. Just wonderful! There were three other
- workers, Bogomoletz, Lyda Filipinko and Nadochka Lisofskaya. These
- were the senior scientists. I was one of the youngest. The academician and
- director of whole institute was Javorsky.
-

There were many research institutes. They assigned me to petroleum, which at the time was incredibly important and necessary. In our terrible national disorder, neither the government nor anyone else knew how huge our national petroleum supply really was. Then came rumors... but our government was afraid of everything, so even scientific data was only whispered. We could have done better and exploited our large petroleum reserves, but no one really considered how to improve our research and to do better.

We worked three eight hour shifts. As the German invasion loomed, all the researchers and the laboratory workers were organized into brigades to guard the academy. I don't think we had guns. We patrolled outside the building and up and down all the corridors. Our orders were to look for spies who would blow up the place.

But the Germans did not need this institute and they certainly did not want to blow it up. When they wanted something they just marched through to it and simply took it. They had done this as they marched through one country after another on their way eastward.

I remember one time during my shift just before dawn I was on my regular patrol through the academy as I had been many times in the previous months, and as I walked along the street in the distance I heard the distant muffled sounds of boom, bam, boom. Powerful but still far away. I did not understand right away what it was, but it was the beginning of the war.

This was how it began. The Germans gathered a huge army and it put it into position along our western border. Stalin still did not believe it. He said, "This was untrue. Lies! All Lies! Hitler will not attack us!" It is hard to explain how it felt. To understand this it is necessary to read *The 900 Days of Leningrad (The Siege of Leningrad)* by Harrison E. Salisbury. It captures the beginning of the war very well.



During the First Battle of Kiev, this pontoon bridge over the Dniepr was constructed in a day. The Germans encircled Kiev, which fell to them September 26, 1941 after three months of siege. Of the 400,000 plus soldiers in the city only 15,000 escaped. In retaliation, the Soviets conducted a scorched earth policy that included destroying as much of the city as possible.

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

We all knew that the Germans were getting ready to enter and take the city. After all, we were under siege. The city was undefended. They were standing there just waiting for the order to invade.



Russian men and women rescue their belongings from their burning homes, said to have been set on fire by the Russians, part of a scorched earth policy to prevent Germans from using the land. This is apparently a Leningrad suburb on October 21, 1941. Similar scenes were taking place in Ukraine. Photo Credit: <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/operation-barbarossa-in-rare-pictures-1941/>.

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

When they were given the order they moved through villages and through fields. They just marched forward because we were not able to offer any resistance at all. Our troops were unprepared and undersupplied. When the Germans first attacked some of our troops were sleeping in tents; some were doing something else. No one was ready to defend. That was how it began. What was difficult is that Papa was sent somewhere out of the city and we had no contact with him. I did not know if he was dead or alive.

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

The shooting continued day and night all around us, from all quarters. The Germans surrounded the city but they did not want to destroy it. They were saving it for themselves. They planned to relocate the Ukrainian population to Germany to work in heavy industry and mines like Katowice. Thousands more were supposed to be sent off to die in Siberia. Their own population would then be resettled into Ukraine.



Of course, at the time, we knew nothing of the German plans. Nothing. We only saw that we were surrounded and the Germans were employing a huge force to take the city. And we naively thought that the Germans were a civilized people because in 1914 they were close and did nothing terrible to anyone. We did not know the details of the arrangements Lenin had made with the Kaiser and we thought that again, they would simply come and go. So this would be wonderful.

It was hoped that during the German occupation, Stalin would somehow bite the dust with God's help, and we will be able to be free. We were dead wrong. Nothing like that happened.

Already people had started to organize the Russian Liberation Army. When the time came, this Russian Liberation Army would come forward, and somehow or other negotiate with the Red Army,—you have to remember that the Red Army had many ordinary people who originated from the villages and knew what was going on and had nothing against a change of Russian government — but not German! No foreigners.

We have this little idiosyncratic prejudice against foreigners ruling us. We had nothing against foreigners per se. They used to come and live among us all the time. There were many of them over the centuries. But this is our land after all. Our own blood has enriched this soil. How could we let foreigners rule over us here?

The siege went on and we existed. Day after day we heard the sound of guns and day after day the Germans remained outside the city. I think it began in June and I don't remember how long it lasted — maybe three months?

Then the "attack" came. Fully armed columns of Germans marched along the Andreevsky Spusk and people came out and greeted them joyously with flowers. That is the kind of attack upon us it was! They marched through the center of town and down Kreschatik.

Further, they took over the buildings which house the big stores today. They made their command center in the buildings on the corner of Fundukleevskaya and Kreschatik, where there was a huge store. They took over a second big store on the opposite corner as well. Then everything settled down.

Everyone congratulated everyone else and people said that our suffering was over. We were liberated. We believed that the war had washed over us harmlessly and had swept away the communist garbage. But that is not how things turned out.



Kiev burning. This is Kreschatik Street, the center of the city, where Grigoriy Britchkin, Helen's grandfather, had his crystal and glassware shop. (Until it was forcibly taken from the family during the revolution in 1917). The Soviets were blowing up Kiev. The local people knew the explosions were the work of the Soviets because the Reds knew the buildings well and hid bombs in attics, cellars, and storage areas no outsider would have known. The family dragged their belongings to the middle of the street and waited there as buildings burned all around them. The house across the street from theirs (on Malopodvalnaya) was destroyed.

From the first days explosions began. The command center blew up. Pieces flew into the air. It was our own people who blew it up. Slavs. Soviet People. Soviet brigades hid among the buildings and then set off charges. It was awful. This continued. Then the house where the Germans were quartered blew up. One day the Germans were in the opera house watching a performance and a bomb was set off in the opera, but thank God it never detonated. It fell and lay there on the main floor and did not go off. Literally every day and every night something exploded.

Of course, the Germans started to retaliate and their response was rather stupid. They took hostages at random and killed them. After the command center was blown up, they killed 300 innocent people. Later, more. And they announced everywhere that if there were more such actions, that

they would continue killing so many thousand, etc. And they did. These were innocent people who looked to the Germans as liberators and now they had become the enemy. But that is what the Soviets wanted. They wanted the population to turn on the Germans.

There was a woman, Anya Salets Grange, who was a doctor and worked in Papa's hospital. She was a respectable and intelligent woman. It had nothing to do with wealth either, because her family never had anything of particular value. They were not communists or anything. Her father was walking down the street, and they grabbed him. Anya went to the Germans, because she worked with them in the hospital, but they shot him anyway, along with hundreds of other people taken at random. Idiocy. After that, the attitude toward the Germans changed.

Then all of a sudden we heard that the Jews were supposed to gather at some spot to the north, at Lukyanovka. Babi Yar is near Lukyanovka.

Nobody of course knew anything about what was going on with Jews in Germany or Poland. We knew nothing about the killing, concentration camps or anything. The first time we heard of the slaughter of the Jews was when we had left Kiev and were riding with the singing man to Dubno.

I remember, we were sitting in the evening in his room in Dubno and he said, "and you do not know that they slaughtered them all? They made a mass grave." He recounted how they were shot and my hair stood on end. We did not know anything about it when it was happening. I am certain that 99% of our population did not know anything about what was going on there. They told us that nothing was happening.

All we knew was that soon after they came into the city (September 1941) the Jews were ordered to gather their valuables and to proceed to Babi Yar, a ravine outside of Kiev. We just assumed that they would be taken out of the city somewhere and that they would be required to pay for their passage and living. I remember I was walking along the street, it was at the end of Kreschatik and there was a tiny old lady. I even helped her cross the road. She was clutching a little bag of valuables to her thin chest.

She looked at me with large frightened eyes and they filled with tears. She was going to her execution. They were all going to their death. And we knew nothing about it. We just assumed they were going to be driven out of the city to some other place. And they all went so innocently, any way they could get there. No one spoke to anyone as they went. We never imagined what the actual truth turned out to be. Imagine, and I helped her across the street!

They brought some kind of train to that place. They passed rumors around that these trains were going to take them somewhere else. There was talk of Palestine. We learned the truth later, when we had already left Kiev.

Deep inside, I knew there was death awaiting this old lady and many others but I don't know how I knew. There are many things in this world that we cannot always explain.



General von Kleist at the Dniepr River in Kiev. Von Kleist commanded Operation Barbarossa, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, taking Stalin by surprise, with the Red Army troops completely unprepared. The Germans burned fields and villages on their march through Ukraine and shot civilians in retaliation for military and partisan attacks.

We did not know about these atrocities going on in the background of our lives. For one thing, our main preoccupation was with the problem of survival. There was nothing to eat. For another, there was no communication with the outside world or even Russia. No radio, no newspapers. Whatever little we did know came to us through whispers. The Germans kept their genocide as secret as possible and quite successfully at that.

When the Soviet Army retreated, they placed explosives all over the city to blow it up before the Germans could occupy it. Helen was part of a brigade that went around Kiev looking for the bombs to prevent them being detonated.

Helen's story of Kiev burning.

During that time Papa still had not returned.

They started exploding the buildings just after he left. When they left, (presumably the Soviets got pushed out by the Germans), there were 3 months when we belonged to no one. We were a no man's land. All around there was shooting. When the Germans entered the city, the Reds probably returned dressed in other clothes. They were called "Himovtisi" or "Soviehimovtisi". They played a particularly important role. I do not know exactly who, but it was all done by our compatriots. They were inhabitants of Kiev and they had an intimate knowledge of the whole city; they knew the people and they organized the explosions and the destruction.

Things went from bad to worse every day. They blew up the kettles in the electrical generating station. We then had no electricity. They blew up the major pumps bringing water into the city. We were left with no water. The Germans were trying to restore them as fast as they could. Not from the goodness of their hearts. They wanted to preserve Kiev. You saw what Kiev is. Kiev is a jewel. They wanted to save it for themselves.

And here there was destruction from all sides. This lasted for about a few weeks. And it must be said the local population showed itself to be extremely capable. People started to come together in different homes and organize brigades to inspect all the attics, basements and buildings for bombs and to guard them. When they found explosives, the notified the military and specialists were sent in to detonate or remove the explosives. Thanks to them, tons of explosives were extracted before they could blow up.

People were dragging out explosives from basements and other parts of buildings. This was the handiwork of our dear Soviet "brothers." Probably it was organized by the NKVD but there is no way now to be certain.

*They were called "Himovtisi" or "Soviehimovtisi" (KL: I can't locate this term but am keeping it here for research purposes).*

Maybe, she was talking about Osoaviakhimovtisi? (Осоавиахимовцы), members of <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osoaviakhim>



- The moment that the Germans came in, the NKVD left the city but they
- remained on the periphery of Kiev where they organized command posts
- from which they directed the resistance activities in the city. From the
- outside they sent information into the city. I don't know what they were
- called because I was not there. But these were brigades that formed the
- resistance against the Germans.
- 
- We considered ourselves Soviet people at the time. But these resistance
- fighters considered us the enemy. To them, anyone who remained in Kiev
- was no Soviet.
- 
- Those of us who remained and lived in the city organized the brigades.
- We, the people, ourselves. It was totally spontaneous. There was no other
- organized resistance on the part of the inhabitants. I was in a brigade.
- 
- At that time I still lived at Papa's house on #34 Fundukleevskaya Street. I
- inspected the houses in that area. These were big city buildings. It was not
- easy to examine the whole building for bombs. There are huge basements
- and attics and lots of places to hide explosives. The brigades were formed
- just by common people who were left behind in this captive city.
- 

Kiev burning. This is the corner of Proreznaya Street and Kreschatik—the exact intersection where Grigoriy Britchkin's (Helen's grandfather's) crystal and glassware shop was located. 1941. The Soviet saboteurs placed dynamite all over the city as they retreated, cut water pipes and blew up the electrical plant so that Kiev would be destroyed when the Germans took it. Helen worked in a citizen's brigade, searching for explosives.

A little later, what did our dear government do? It decided to bomb US! So they started bombing. Finally, the situation got desperate. I had returned to live with my parents again on Malopadvalnaya because Papa was still away somewhere and I needed to help the old folks when the bombing started.

The city started to burn so we dragged all our things in huge chests into the middle of the street. In addition to placing explosives around the city, the resistors now started fires in the buildings. The city was burning. This was done by the Soviets. They had left their operatives in the city specially to do this and by doing so they had turned against us. We had become the enemy together with the Germans. The Soviets had their own logic to explain this but they considered those of us who had remained in Kiev to be untrustworthy. So they said to themselves, "The Devil take them! We might as well destroy them!"

When the Germans saw what was happening.—they are an unusual people—How they work!—They developed a plan to isolate the fires by blowing up buildings in a ring around them to prevent them from spreading. In this way they created fire corridors.

The problem was that the blown up houses were inhabited and no one knew in advance which houses were going to be demolished. That is why everyone moved out into the streets. but this was made up of homes where people lived. The Germans evacuated those who wanted to leave the city, but nobody really wanted to be evacuated. Where would we be evacuated to? We had nowhere to go. Back to Stalin again? We had survived 25 years under Stalin and we knew what was what. Nobody wanted to leave. Why leave?

It was then that we dragged all our belonging into the street. We sat in the middle of the street, day and night because we did not know which houses would be demolished. Near us they blew up buildings along Funduleevskaya and the street was burning. We watched and we waited. They blew up the house across the street from Grandfather's house and we expected that our house would be next but there they stopped and it was spared.

This is how Kiev burned. They lit fires and blew up buildings. When they blew up the water pumping station, the Germans brought in canvas tubes from the west. They extended them downward from Kiev for 2 kilometers into the river. There they installed pumps and started to pump water. And the resistance cut the pipes. Nothing could be done. There was not a drop of water to put out the fires. They apparently cut off the water supply and electricity first and then started the fires and explosions.



A photo of the First Battle of Kiev, August 7 to September 26, 1941, the Nazi takeover. In the second Battle of Kiev, November 3, 1943-December 22, 1943, the Red Army re-took Kiev.

•  
• That is when all the sages of the west started to cry “The Germans are blowing up Kiev!” How much crap, how many lies were said here (in the West) out of damn ignorance. It is unforgivable.  
•

• There was not much we could do about it all. The people just helped each other and treated each other very well. The important point that has always been missed is that it was not the Germans who burned the city. It was our own Soviet people. Maybe this was our punishment for not wanting to leave. But if we had left that would not have been a honeymoon either because for those who left and escaped to the East, things were no better. They, also were not fed. And they suffered sickness.  
•

• Your aunt, Olga, Lyosig and the two boys; they thought and thought. There was a period of time when they still could slip through to the west to us. They evacuated to Ryazan. I don’t know what would have been better. Not one path nor the other was easy. Either way you lost and you suffered. I think, for us, there is no question, that we did the right thing.  
•

• If God forbid, I had to choose all over again, I would have chosen the same way. Those monsters who were annihilating us under Stalin...that was our own people. They were Russians and Ukrainians. That was not Stalin  
•

•  
• shooting all alone. Who was it then? It was possible we were looking  
• at them in the face. They went against the innocent, shooting women,  
• children, everyone. Just because they were like mad dogs. So, they paid for  
• it in the end.  
•

• I never want to look those people in the face again. To visit the land is all  
• right, but I would not like to live among them. The monsters and dogs are  
• still there among the population. They turn on their own people. The best  
• and most productive people either left or were killed. Now they don't even  
• know their asses from their heads. This is how it was.  
•

• In the end, that is how it came about that we were relieved of all our worldly  
• possessions.... First during the Revolution, and then again when we had to  
• leave Kiev.  
•



## CHAPTER TWO

### Leaving Kiev forever

#### Kiev 1941–1943

##### Life Under Occupation and the Great Patriotic War. Helen's Story.

• We begin with the beginning of the war. Papa was taken into the army. We  
• found ourselves in Kiev under occupation. Kiev was literally given to the  
• Germans. At first, whole armies gave themselves up. Everyone thought they  
• would liberate us from Stalin, but it didn't take long to figure out what was  
• happening...the Nazis treated us like slaves, not like human beings at all.  
• Then peoples' attitude changed and our Soviet leadership understood this.  
• We said among ourselves, "Hitler forced people to love Stalin." We began to  
• think, if you are destined to be smacked in the face, it better be by your own  
• kind, not by a foreigner.

The Kievans did not know, at the time, that the Nazi plan was to deport 31 million Ukrainians to Siberia and replace them with German farmers. This was Hitler's policy of "Lebensraum," creating living space for Germans in Ukraine. According to this plan, the rest of the population was to be exterminated or enslaved.

• Eventually, the Ukrainian army disintegrated. The Germans came into Kiev  
• and the city was taken after a siege. During this time, I had a miscarriage.  
• Sometime later, Papa came back walking from another part of Ukraine with  
• one of his soldiers. He showed up at the door and he was thin, worn, still in  
• uniform. Everyone was very excited to see him.

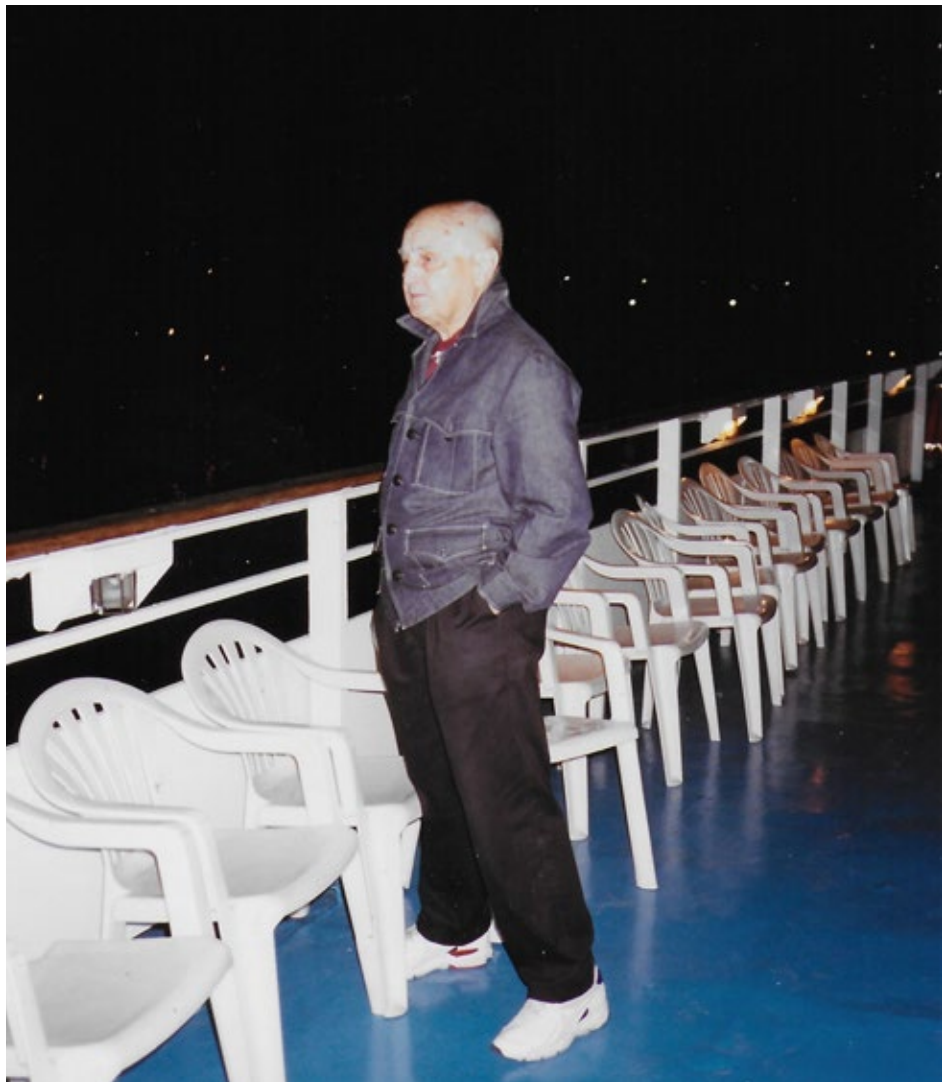
• I was grabbed in the street by a German—he was shaking people, saying  
• he needed a translator, Now! I learned German and I typed and translated  
• between Germans and our people. Pop's teacher Jakov Ivanovich Pivovonski  
• was asked to be a surgeon in the German hospital, and he agreed only if Pop  
• could work there also. Life started settling. It was like Anglos and Blacks.  
• The Germans were called "Volksdeutsche"—people of German origin. (*At  
• work, class lines were clearly drawn, with separate cafeterias for Ukraini-  
• ans and Germans*). We lived with hopes of a future peace, but peace became  
• cloudy. Rumors came of the finishing of the Eastern Road from the Persian  
• Gulf. Along this road, the allies began to pump assistance, propping up the  
• Red Army, and the Red Army gained strength. In 1943 the Red Army started  
• its offensive westward.

• The Soviets created a new narrative. Stalin declared this to be a Great  
• Patriotic War for the Homeland and proclaimed that we needed to defend  
• Russia. Imagine! Defend Russia! We were educated to believe that Russia

Helen standing on Shevchenko Boulevard, gazing at the route they travelled out of Kiev in 1943, by foot and horse-and-carriage. This was her only trip back to Kiev, in summer of 1995 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.



Peter watching from the deck of the cruise ship as Kiev recedes in the distance, saying goodbye for the last time. 1995.



• does not exist. There is only the SFSR, the Russian  
• Soviet Socialist Republic. There is only the Union.  
• If during the time when I lived there, anyone would  
• have said, I am going to fight to “defend Russia,”  
• you would have been taken away by the police that  
• very night. Here, suddenly, we were stunned. It was  
• difficult for us to even imagine that one day the  
• Soviets themselves would call for a Patriotic War  
• and Defense of Russia!

• Stalin opened the churches to boost patriotic  
• feelings. In our time there, the church did not exist.  
• If you still had some icons and they suspected that  
• you are religious, then that is the end for you. Here,  
• all at once, the churches are opened, and people  
• flooded into them, but still with some caution.  
• Those who went to church were the old who had  
• nothing to lose. Young people who had to work or  
• were somehow connected to the system did not go.

• For now, it was Patriotism! For Russia! They kept changing the permitted  
• terms. People began to resist the Germans, for two reasons: first, the Red  
• Army gained strength and became better organized and second, the Germans  
• showed themselves to be slave drivers. We lived under a dictatorship.



The Cathedral of St. Vladimir during the time when churches were closed by the Soviet government. Some, like St. Michael's, were demolished, while others, like St. Vladimir's (above) were converted to museums. The heading above the door reads, “Anti-religious Museum.”



St. Vladimir's as it was in pre-Soviet times, and as it is again, today. Peter was baptized here during the transitional period before the churches were completely shut down. Peter and Helen visited the church the night before they left Kiev for good, in September 1943. It was full of people and the choir was singing. Outside they heard shooting and explosions, as the Red Army neared Kiev.

## Olga's birth, May 12, 1943. Told by Helen.

- It was the German occupation of Kiev. I had become pregnant again. Things
- had settled down. For maybe a half year, we didn't hear artillery. Then one
- night we were sitting around the table, and we heard planes and bombs. It
- was a wonderful May night, warm, with some light in the sky. The next day
- we heard the Opera was bombed during a performance while Nazi com-
- manders were in the audience. A couple of days later labor pains started.
- 

The National Opera House survived World War II. The Kiev underground had planned to blow up the building to kill Nazi officers as they watched the plays. On the 2nd of May, 1943, the Opera was hit by a bomb, but it didn't explode after breaking through the roof and the floor, and ended up stuck in the sand that filled the basement. Source: website for the National Opera House. [opera.com.ua](http://opera.com.ua).



Helen was taken to the hospital for Ukrainians, which was on the outskirts of town at that time, a wooded area near the Industrialni Institute (her university, also called the Polytechnic Institute). It was run by an excellent doctor, Vasily Andreevich Kavonski, a good friend of Peter's teacher, Yakov Ivanovich Pivovonski. Vasily Andreevich came in shortly after Helen was admitted, checked her, and said things were fine and she'd be done before 12.

Peter, meanwhile, was working at the German hospital on the other side of town on Pushkin Street (Alexander hospital). During the occupation, it served only Germans. Pivovonsky, who was one of the best surgeons in Ukraine, was offered the Directorship of that hospital, and said he would only take it if Peter could work there. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian staff were Untermenschen—an inferior race of people. Peter describes how he hung his jacket in the doctors' closet and when a German doctor saw it, he grabbed it from the hanger and threw it on the floor. How could a Ukrainian dare to put his coat in the same closet as mine!"

Helen continues.

•  
• Labor started and was progressing normally. Not too far from this hospital,  
• though, Hungarians were stationed, and since Hungary was united with  
• Germany, the Red Army started bombing. We heard the planes overhead and  
• thought they would just pass over us, but they started to drop bombs right  
• onto the hospital. God knows where they were aiming because the bombs  
• were falling just anywhere. At least they got the right city! When the bombs  
• were falling, the doors blew away and there was shrapnel all around. They  
• dropped many bombs and destroyed the hospital, thinking it was some  
• military target.

•  
• The nurses were wonderful. They moved me to a corner which had no  
• window. They put me in a chair in the corner and several of them moved  
• a heavy case in front to protect me. I said, 'What do I do now?' They said,  
• 'Pray.' You could hear the planes, a thin, high-pitched buzz. You know a  
• bomb has been dropped. Windows and doors were shaking.

This went on for several hours, and all Helen's labor activity stopped. The bombers left, but there was no communication with anyone because everything was destroyed, so Peter didn't know what was happening.

•  
• In the morning, word came out that our hospital was severely bombed.

Somehow, they managed to send an ambulance and transferred Helen to the German hospital. For 2-3 days, labor did not return and they did not have medicine that would induce it. She could not drink anything and there was no IV.

•  
• On the second day I began to lose consciousness. I just lay there. I remember  
• looking at spots on the ceiling that were like cherries or lines. They melted  
• away into one. I thought it would be nice to die.

On the third day they called in the well-known "society doctor" Kosobutsky. Helen didn't think much of his skill. The baby's heartrate was fading fast and Kosobusky said he couldn't use forceps because the uterus hadn't opened enough. He decided to open the uterus by force and take the baby out in pieces to have a chance at saving the mother, though the mother might not make it either. They couldn't do a caesarian because there were no antibiotics and that might cause septicemia. She was wheeled to the operating table.

•  
• They were all ready to operate. They told me later that Kosobutsky came in  
• and he was upset because it is an unpleasant operation to cut up a baby in  
• a woman. The baby was dying, and of course the woman may not make it  
• either. He was a little frightened at the thought of possibly killing two birds  
• with one shot. I remember female faces with masks over me and instru-

ments steaming on one side. On the other side the instruments were shiny, already steamed. They gave me an anesthetic and the pain subsided.

The phones still worked and Pop had telephoned Vasiliy Andreevich, the head of the Ukrainian hospital where I was at first. Vasili Andreevich said he would come there. From where he lived to Pushkin Street he had to cross all of Kiev, more than 3 km, and he was crippled; one leg was shorter than the other. He told Pop, 'Stall them! I hope I'll be in time,' and raced across town limping, wearing his surgical gloves, with his forceps under his arm. At the hospital, he burst in the door just as I was already out and they were ready to operate, 'Wait! Wait! I brought my forceps!'

Kosobutsky said that there is nothing to be done.

'Let me try.' Vasili Andreevich went over to the operating table and yanked Olga out. He was an exceptionally talented man. I remember that I woke up and I was completely dehydrated.

A nurse came and sat by me on the bed and said that I'd probably not want any more children after this ordeal but I answered, 'Oh no! I want more children!'

So that was one of our adventures of war. But thank God it ended well.

Olga's birth certificate from Kiev, 1943.

Свідоцтво про народження № 438

П. Ставраки  
Ольга Петрівна  
(ім'я та по батькові)

народилася (-лась) двадцятьом травня тисяча дев'яностої року (місяць, день та рік)  
м. Києві, про що в книзі записів народжень за 1943 рік  
місяця 6 дня зроблено відповідний запис.

П. Ставраки народився (-лась) у шлюбі від батька  
Ставраки Петра Стіпановича  
(прізвище, ім'я та по батькові)

кремської національності української віроісповідання і матері  
Соханської Олени Васильовни  
(прізвище, ім'я та по батькові)

української національності православної віроісповідання і належить  
до кремської національності \_\_\_\_\_ віроісповідання \_\_\_\_\_

М. П. БЮРО РЕЄСТРАЦІЇ  
Керівник Бюро реєстрації [підпис] (підпис)  
Реєстратор В. Гай (підпис)

1943 року 6 липня



St. Sophia's Cathedral, a Unesco World Heritage Site, where Olga was baptized shortly after her birth on May 12, 1943. The Soviets opened the churches for worship in order to build national morale for the coming offensive against the Nazis. Prior to that and again, after the war, religion was forbidden and in the 1930s many ancient monuments were blown up and levelled. Olga was baptized in the little chapel designated specifically for this type of service. Two persons served as godparent. Vasily Ivanovich was one of them and donated his little gold cross. The second was Tamara Bogaterchuk, who didn't believe in God but was willing to take the role.



Helen and Olga in front of the hospital where Olga was born. Photo taken 1995.

## The Germans try to take Peter into the Army. Peter's Story.

•  
•  
• During the German occupation, the Germans decided to make a brigade  
• out of Ukrainian soldiers, about 5000 strong, place it in the middle of the  
• Ukrainian Republic like a decoy, and attract the Red Army, which was  
• supposed to attack it vigorously. At that point, the Germans planned to  
• counter-attack in turn and smash the Red Army by means of their usual  
• tactic of encirclement. To secure all necessary services and equipment, the  
• Germans purchased and specially designed a uniform of excellent quality,  
• including boots which were given to those soldiers and also to me. The  
• medical care was arranged in a sophisticated manner and I was supposed  
• to be a physician there. A decision was made in our family immediately to  
• take action and avoid that kind of involvement. None of us was much for the  
• communist system in Russia but none of us was for the German Nazi either.  
• After reflecting for a while and consulting with my friend and teacher, Dr.  
• Pivovonski, the decision was made to elevate my temperature artificially  
• and pretend a serious infectious disease. A very well-known method was  
• used and injection of typhoid vaccine was carried out repeatedly several  
• days in succession. My temperature rose to 104 or even higher, I had severe  
• chills and it was obvious that I was ill. The German physician from the  
• German occupation forces visited me at home, checked my temperature  
• and apparently was satisfied that my health condition should postpone my  
• departure with this brigade. As a matter of fact, I don't think the brigade  
• ever went anywhere but at that point I was free from getting involved and  
• satisfied by the result of this plan.

•  
•  
• The physician who visited me was the chief of the medical service of  
• the occupational German force and his name was Groskopf. It's a typical  
• German name which, translated, means big head. Dr. Groskopf visited me at  
• home and decided I was sick. Was he really convinced I was sick or maybe  
• he decided to just close his eyes on the actual situation? It's hard to say.  
• Groskopf was not a bad guy, he was not a man of the Nazi party. He was just  
• a physician drafted there and it is possible that he understood my scheme  
• but still decided to go along with it.

•  
•  
• I was sorry that they took away the new boots.  
•



## The Red Army Advances. Helen's Story.

The Germans start to retreat. It is still far. We are hopeful that everything will straighten out and both Hitler and Stalin will be destroyed. Out of this something more or less democratic will emerge in our country. Maybe not right away, but eventually.

For us, this truly became a patriotic war to reclaim our birthright, although we did not succeed. (*Helen is referring to their hope that Stalin's regime would be defeated*). The communists were still in control, and the country was not really ours.

It was not difficult to decide to leave because it was evident that the Soviet offensive had begun and the Red Army was coming. When they came, the soldiers acted like insane men. They killed, tortured and maimed those who remained behind. Especially in our case, we were known. (*Peter's father had been a highly regarded physician; Helen's family came from the wealthy merchant class, pre-1917*). There was little doubt about what they would do to us. It is even unpleasant now to think about it today. We were called the Not-Yet-Exterminated Bourgeoisie, or Former People.

This was the reality that was moving upon us. From the Eastern side of the Dnieper came the sound of machine gun fire. Later we heard 'they have already reached Darnitsa' (*on the eastern outskirts of Kiev*). Many people had started fleeing. It was not easy to make arrangements and to leave. Our family was generally not very practical and did not know how to make arrangements. No one. Not my side nor the other.

Many good people would be ready to fight for their country, but we did not want to fight for dictators – either foreign or domestic.

Everything got worse every day. And here came the one great German defeat, Stalingrad (February 1943). The situation on the front was very bad. It was winter and the weather was severe. It is like with Napoleon in 1812. The Russians fought street by street. They said that no one fights as fiercely as the Russian army. Stalingrad changed the war and from there the Germans began their retreat. They went back home.

From the west there was no way to reach us. But from the East it was splendid. The road was built from the east. It still exists. And during this time the road was finished. Along this road a fortune in supplies flowed in from America – ammunition, clothes for soldiers, food – all to assist the Soviets, their allies. The Americans took it all onto their own backs. The road was a river of everything that was needed to defeat the Nazis and it

flowed without interruption, to Ufa, Kazakhstan. Ufa was always the contact point between the eastern part of the Soviet Union and the western. It was connected by railroad to the west. Along this road also flowed immigration to the East.

Under the return of the Red Army control our prospects were grim. In the best case scenario, we would be slaves again in a dictatorship. More likely, we would be killed, arrested, or simply tortured right there in front of the family, one by one or all together.

We decided that if this happens, we will not wait until they start killing us, but will gather everything movable that we own and leave. We had to figure out how to accomplish this because grandma (*Baba Lyena*) cannot walk. And leaving her is out of the question. So, when the shooting got close to the East Bank my father, Deda Vench, went to the bazaar and bought two horses and a cart.

He fancied himself a good judge of horse flesh, but looking at those two horses, I was doubtful they would long survive and unfortunately, this turned out to be right. Still there was nothing else to be done but to go as far as they could take us and then see what happens. He also went to one of his carpenter friends and ordered a number of wooden chests to carry all our belongings. Three of the smaller chests have survived to this day. Once the decision was made we began packing.



Two photos of a wooden chest that Vasily Ivanovich had made for the departure from Kiev. Inside is printed Peter's name: Dr. Petros Stavrakis. The trunks were made of plywood and could also serve as benches or beds on the road.

## Loading the horse cart. Peter's Story.

When we were leaving Kiev, we had a couple of huge coffers or chests. One was as wide as this table and two thirds as long. It was incredibly heavy. Vasili Ivanovich and I proceeded to load it onto the cart with the help of Ivan Ivanovich, the groundskeeper. Ivan Ivanovich had a weakness for alcohol. He drank everything and anything.

During the German occupation it was not easy to obtain alcohol, so he drank methyl alcohol. In Russian it is called "denatured". They died it blue so people would recognize it and not drink it. It was poisonous. But the color did not deter Ivan Ivanovich and he drank it like a pig. This tended to undermine his health.

When we dragged the chest outside, I, being the youngest, was on one end and the other two each held a corner on the opposite end. All at once, the corner Ivan Ivanovich was holding up started to sink. Down, down, down it went, and he sank with it until the chest and Ivan Ivanovich were flat on the ground.

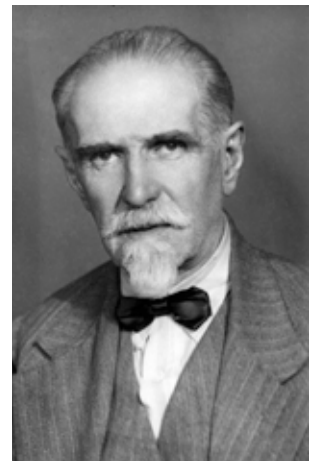
I jumped to his side and checked his pulse. There was none. He was not breathing. We quickly carried him into the room, which was already partly bare of furniture, and laid him down on a mattress. I had my medical bag nearby and gave him a shot of adrenaline but it had no effect whatsoever. He died. In the middle of the confusion, someone said, "This is a good sign, people! It's a good omen for the future!"

We then decided that the chest may be too heavy for us, and it also had the stigma of death on it, so we gave it to Ivan Ivanovich's widow. She was delighted. It was full of excellent things such as linen sheets which here have no particular significance here but there, they were valuable. So we lost a few material things, but the old lady was delighted. She had lost a drunk and gained a chest of valuable household goods.

This was not an auspicious beginning for a journey and we were now quite nervous. Jakov Ivanch Pivovonski, my professor of surgery, was with us. He was the only person who came to see us off. He loved me very much.

Jakov Ivanovich was about 72 or 73 when we left and he had bad emphysema. When he walked he suffered from shortness of breath.

They never saw them again. Five years later, he was still alive, because he put them in contact with his daughter Nina Jacovlevna Malitskaya in New York and she provided them with an affidavit of support that made it possible to go to the US after the war.



Jakov Ivanovich Pivovonski, Peter's professor of surgery and a well-known surgeon and dear friend. He helped Peter in many ways, such as finding him a position at Alexandrovski Hospital, and helping Peter form the plan to inject himself with typhus, in this way avoiding forced service in the Ukrainian brigade of the German army. He was the only one at the house on Malopodvalnaya to see them off the day they left, September 21, 1943, and was crying. They never saw him again.

## Leaving from Malopodvalnaya. Helen's Story.

•  
• It was the 21st of September, 1943, a Tuesday. We were living on Malopod-  
• valnaya Street. A number of other residents had left and there were a  
• few empty rooms into which we moved. Of those people who watched  
• us load the cart that day, no one believed we would survive. Anyone with  
• common sense would have thought that survival for us was impossible. But  
• sometimes what goes against common sense is very real.  
•

• Again, we would go all together. There was no question of leaving grandma  
• (Baba Lyena). She could hardly walk. That is the Slavic way. If we must die,  
• then we might as well die all together. Then there is the child. Four and a  
• half months. What can you do with the child? Nothing. You take it in your  
• arms and start walking. The dog as well.  
•

• That is how we left without any kind of plan. We had no great hopes. There  
• were no discussions. There was no soul searching. Crawl to your place.  
• Accommodate grandma comfortably and go forward. We went forward. I  
• had a gemstone that was very beautiful which had been purchased during  
• troubled times. I never wore it. It was this gem and perhaps something else,  
• that papa used to pay for the cart and horses.  
•

• We chose the day. Jacov Invanovich Pivovonski was there to see us off. He  
• was crying, poor thing. Everybody thought we were goners. Everyone. But  
• we did not think anything. We knew we were lost. The day was beautiful,  
• clear, like it is here now in September. We went.  
•

#12 Malopodvalnaya Street, the mansion built by Helen's grandfather Grigori Britchkin, which was confiscated by the Soviets in 1917-18, and where Helen grew up in poverty in one of two rooms they managed to keep. The family left Kiev from this home, with a cart pulled by two horses piled with luggage and Baba Lyena, Helen's grandmother, sitting on top. The rest of them walked, including the dog, Topsisic. Photo: 2015.



You remember the side entrance to the house which led to our rooms? There were large stairs leading up to the entrance made of granite slabs laid one over another. The door was of magnificent oak. And I remember that house, illuminated by the sunlight and a couple of gawkers and onlookers staring at us.

The cart was loaded up like a huge mound, tied up with ropes, and on the very top sat grandma holding her parasol, wearing her hat and carrying her pre-revolutionary handbag. Papa (Vasili Ivanovich) stood with the dog, Topsik. We did not even have a leash. He was tied with a rope. I was with Olga in my arms on the left of the cart. Baba Anya was on the right side of the cart wearing her fur with the long fox tail flapping over her shoulder, so as not to leave it behind. Later there is a story about that fox tail. On the left side walked Deda Vench. He was as always, dressed in his boots and peasant clothes.

## Heading West to Nowhere. Helen's Story.

### Walking West

We all felt stunned. We simply went. Clack, clack, clack, along the center of the road where the traffic passed and the pavement was hard (mostovaya). There was only one road for us take. Twenty five years after the revolution, the Soviets had managed to construct only one main road, and it was not blacktop but gravel. The gravel was well compacted, at least at the beginning, and it went all the way to Brno, Czechoslovakia, where we originally wanted to go. You can still find it on the map.

We left Malopodvalnaya and turned left onto Vladimirskaya Street, then right onto Bibikov's Boulevard (now Boulevard Shevchenko). Then we traveled about 3 kilometers past Vladimirski Sobor (St. Vladimir's, where Peter was baptized) and my Industrialni Institute, to the outskirts of the city. (Helen also calls this road Zhytomirskoye Shosse. It went straight west to the city of Zhytomir, about 150 kilometers, and beyond to Czechoslovakia).



This is the road the family took, with a horse and carriage for their belongings and for Baba Lyena, the rest of them walking. It leads straight West. They had a vague idea of reaching Brno, Czechoslovakia, where Helen's uncles were. It was the only main road out of Kiev and there was a mass exodus of people fleeing the Soviet Union at the same time on the same road as they were.

•  
 •  
 • What a wonderful institution that was! Everybody sings praises to Papa  
 • because he is a doctor. But with us the medical school was just a medical  
 • school and no more. My Kievski Industrialni Institute, (later changed to  
 • Kievski Politeknicheski Institute), was one of the outstanding educational  
 • institutions in the Soviet Union and even before that, in Russia. It was one of  
 • only three such high level polytechnical institutes: Moscow, Leningrad, and  
 • Kiev.  
 •

The Polytechnic Institute,  
 where Helen got her Chemistry  
 degree, with a statue in front  
 honoring Dmitri Ivanovich  
 Mendeleev, a Russian chemist  
 who formulated the Periodic  
 Law and created an influential  
 version of the Periodic Table  
 of Elements. (Wikipedia)  
 The Institute was one of the  
 foremost universities in all of  
 Ukraine and Russia. The family  
 walked past it as they left Kiev  
 on foot.



•  
 •  
 • We left Kiev behind. I don't remember how many kilometers we made along  
 • the Zhytomirskoye Shosse (*Boulevard Shevchenko*). We walked calmly  
 • onward. So far all was well and the weather was still quite good. Evening  
 • fell. The road was filled with activity all around us. People walking every-  
 • where. Others walked with wheelbarrows. Some rode horses. Most had  
 • something in which to carry their things. Old and young walked along. No  
 • one wanted to stay.

•  
 •  
 • I will never forgive the westerners their betrayal (baseness). But now I  
 • see it from a different point of view and understand the Americans better.  
 • The Americans simply figured "good business." Can you imagine all the  
 • business? It blossomed.

•  
 •  
 • The Ukrainian woman says, 'For what you do, you must pay the price.'  
 •

• We thought we could escape death for the present, and further on, God  
• knows. We tried to think about the boys in Brno, Czechoslovakia, my uncles.  
• My grandmother, mother and Deda Vench were hoping we would go to  
• them. Papa had some romantic notions about his family in Greece and  
• wanted to go to there.

• A rough plan emerged as we left Kiev behind us. If we could manage to  
• get out of the USSR, which had always been the big hurdle for us, then we  
• would head west and there is Czechoslovakia. It is not that far. We thought  
• we could leave the old folks there because the country would be familiar.  
• My grandmother and mother both spoke German and French fluently but  
• Deda Vench did not know any other languages but Russian and Ukrainian.  
• In Czechoslovakia at least the language was Slavic and he could get by. The  
• rest of us, Papa, Olga, and I, would continue on, perhaps by train, to Greece.

• My life was rich in adventure. The most difficult and heartbreaking was this  
• part of it, leaving our home forever. In any case, we had a plan but, in the  
• end, nothing worked out the way we had hoped it would.



Refugees on the road with horse carts and walking. Burning villages are visible in the background. This photo show how the roads looked as people fled to find safety and freedom.

### The First Night. The Cart Overturns.

• As we left the city of Kiev behind us, we saw little settlements and villages  
• on both sides of the Zhytomirskoye Shosse. These were in bad shape. The  
• Germans had taken everything they could get their hands on, including the  
• black topsoil which they exported to Germany by the trainload.

•  
•  
• That first night we stopped when it started to get dark. We had been  
• clopping along the right side of the road and we crossed over to the left and  
• stopped in front of a little respectable looking house. People everywhere  
• were wonderful. People were just wonderful. Maybe because they were poor.  
• When people get rich they become unkind. But these people had nothing  
• and they still shared their last crumbs.  
•

•  
• We were walking along as night fell. There we were. Papa was ambling  
• along somewhere at side of the cart with Topsik. I could not see him  
• because it was still dark. I was with you. It was so dark we only heard  
• people calling out to each other. Then all of a sudden we heard boom, Boom!  
• Boom! Boom! I was at the edge the road. Papa grabbed the horses and pulled.  
• It seemed that he wanted to pull them to the left but pulled them to the right.  
• On our right the road dropped off to a steep slope. The horses slipped, the  
• cart slid and the whole kit and caboodle turned over and slid into the ditch.  
• The darkness was complete and on top of that it started to drizzle.  
•

•  
• Horror seized us all. We could not see where anyone was, but I remember  
• my mother's voice shouting, 'Mamochka, ou etez vous?' (Mamochka where  
• are you?) And from somewhere came my grandma's little squeak. 'Here!  
• Here! I am all right!' We were terrified. Our minds and emotions were  
• shattered to begin with and now this! Imagine!  
•

•  
• But miracles happen! No one had even a scratch on him. We lifted up the  
• cart and set it back on its wheels again. Reloaded and arranged the chests  
• and cases. Extricated Grandma from the ditch and sat her on top again, and  
• slowly continued across the road toward a nearby house.  
•

•  
• We stopped and drove into the yard. It was already evening. It was an  
• ordinary house. The mistress met us. Her husband and son were in the war.  
• The Germans had taken everything they could. The poverty was such that ...  
• but then we were used to poverty. When she saw us. she said, "Come in. Rest  
• here," and invited us to stay.  
•

•  
• We then searched for straw and laid it on the floor to sleep on. Our  
• Ukrainian wood burning stoves are large clay structures which take up the  
• whole center of the house. It has a lot of little smooth surfaces half up, like a  
• deep step, to radiate more heat.  
•

•  
• Old people always lay on the stoves because they are warm and comfort-  
• able. I remember there was a little niche into which I put Olga. I changed  
• her diaper, washed the diaper, and laid her into the niche and she lay there  
• on her back with her arms and legs spread out to the sides. She was very  
• happy. I arranged myself on the floor on the straw.  
•





A photo of a typical Ukrainian stove, "pechka," which was the center of the village home. It was used for cooking and heating. Old people and children slept on top of it or near it, as well as cats and dogs.

•  
• I slept soundly in spite of my worries. We were so overtired, that there was  
• no insomnia. When I awoke, I looked around disoriented wondering, "Oh  
• where am I?" I looked at the baby still asleep on the stove in the warmth  
• and between her legs lay a gray cat all curled up. We got up before dawn,  
• and I think we ate some bread with pieces of pork fat that we had brought,  
• sharing with our hostess. There was nothing else to eat. Our hostess had  
• nothing.

•  
• At first light we were able to survey the damage. In the  
• dark everything was done by feel. It turned out that  
• everything was in order. We found all our possessions.  
• But one thing was missing – my mother's fox tail! Ap-  
• parently it had gotten torn off in last night's upheaval. I  
• thought thank God it was only the tail. It could have been  
• far worse. She was very upset but there was nothing we  
• could do about it.

•  
• In the morning, Deda Vench hitched up the horses to the  
• cart and as we started moving out, there was the fox tail flapping in the  
• wind on the right side of the cart where it must have gotten hooked.

•  
• The tumble with the cart was the second omen. First Ivan Ivanch keeled  
• over while loading it. Then the whole cart had turned over into a ditch. Now  
• I was thinking, for God's sake, is something else bound to happen before we  
• finish this journey?



A cart and horse similar to the one the family loaded with all their belongings, and with Helen's grandma, Baba Lyena, perched on top. At one point, the whole cart overturned in the middle of the night, in complete darkness. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but Helen later insisted on dumping many of their belongings by the side of the road to lighten the load.

•  
•  
• In the meantime, we continued onward and the second day a steady drizzle  
• began. It was autumn. August is neither summer nor fall. September is  
• already fall. Now that the rain began, it would continue falling more, less...  
• less, more... The rain-soaked road was machine packed gravel and at first it  
• turned slippery then later, as the water soaked in and dissolved the mud you  
• just sank in as you walked. I don't remember how many days we continued  
• on that road after that first day. Maybe two... maybe three.

•  
• Each day we were walking along the road. Baba Anya on the right, dressed in  
• her fur coat (*песец*—(*pesets*)— *the fur of the polar fox*) with the tail (*с'пистом*)  
• flapping over her shoulder. Deda Vench on the left. Baba Lyena sat atop the  
• mound of baggage. Papa and I walking behind with you in my arms.

•  
• But here were the Germans all around us also trudging homeward hauling  
• their antiaircraft guns, missiles, and other machinery. They were in retreat,  
• so the road was crowded not only with refugees but the defeated Nazis. It  
• was an exodus.

•  
• Wonderful missiles! I will explain. They were large and the guns were pointed  
• westward in the direction they were heading. They are built so that they  
• have a top with a nice flat place in the back under the missile between the  
• wheels and axles. And they let me sit in this spot with the baby. So we rode.

•  
• People walked away from their country, a mass of people. The road was  
• roaring. It was an exodus. There were Cossacks on horseback with whips  
• and bundles tied to their backs holding children. They had high cheekbones  
• and wore fur rimmed hats and homespun blankets sewed like vests—  
• jackets down to their ankles. Full pants. They owned some land and had the  
• same status as squires and were purged by Stalin. Some decided to leave.  
• The Cossacks rode in groups, hooting and hollering. Tanks were all around  
• and shook the ground.

At times the retreating Germans let Helen and the baby hitch a ride under one of the missiles, on a flat place between the wheels and axles. Above is a photo of a similar piece of equipment.



## The horses give out. Lightening the Load.

As time went on, things got worse and worse. On about the third of fourth day it became clear that the horses were not long for this world (literally in Russian: "they are completely giving their souls to god"). One was wheezing and coughing. The other limped. Just imagine what would happen... the chests, grandma, the baby, the dog ... and all of a sudden the horses expire! Rain fell day and night. Under the continuous drizzle the road remained slick and sticky and difficult to navigate.

It soon became obvious that the horses weren't making it. There was no way they could continue to haul that huge mound of stuff piled on top plus Baba Lyena. It became clear to me that we had to lighten the load. We had to dump at least some of the heavy bags. What was in those bags, anyway? They were as heavy as if stuffed with bricks. Linen sheets, tablecloths, night gowns, monogrammed doilies, silver and other good quality things which we saved from before the Soviet era. They came from the time before the Revolution and were incredibly heavy. All those years we had kept them put away for the day when we might need them. We never used them.

I knew if we did not lighten the cart, we were doomed. Baba Lyena could not walk. She needed the horses.

We stopped to rest by the side of the road. The one horse continued to wheeze. "We have to lighten the load," I announced. My parents looked at me. They could not part with this junk. They just could not.

After the preparations, the flight, and leaving their homeland behind forever, all their heartbreak had somehow concentrated in these things on the collapsing horse cart. Papa said nothing, zero. I was not accustomed to asserting myself. My parents always let me do what I wanted. I had no need to assert myself. I was a reasonable person. But I looked at my baby and thought, "She will die. She will perish like a puppy if I don't do something."

I said, "Half these things have to be thrown out." I then heard a gasp. The look on Deda Vench's face! Here was a brave revolutionary. He had talked about abolishing all material wealth! Ha! My mother stared at me in horror. It was as if something dreadful was about to happen. Well, something dreadful had already happened and was about to happen again if we did not get rid of these heavy things and the loss of the sheets and monogrammed towels was not going to be the worst of it. "We have to throw away part of the stuff," I insisted. "That is our only hope of survival."

There were German soldiers walking all around us and past us. They were in a good mood now that they were heading home. The war had gone to hell (*In Russian "to the Devil's Grandmother"*).

•  
• They were just walking along and when they saw us stop, a couple of  
• soldiers came up and asked if they could be of help. I said, 'No, I don't need  
• help but two of the chests have to go. I need to untie them.'

•  
• Baba Anya and Deda Vench placed themselves in front of the cart, their  
• eyes flaming with anger and turned their backs on us in silent protest. Baba  
• Lyena remained on the top of the load. She could not get down by herself  
• anyway. With the help of the Germans, we set some of the chests down on  
• the wet grass. Papa and I could not have lifted them off alone.

•  
• I opened them and I started to throw out the contents. I remember the sheets  
• with my mother's monograms. There were nightgowns, nightshirts, and  
• lots of other lovely things. These were things that we did not use every day  
• because we were saving them for a time of need. In reality, we had lived  
• through many severe shortages, but none had been considered worthy  
• of pulling these pre-Revolutionary luxuries out of storage. The Germans  
• saw this and asked me, 'Would you object if we took these things. We have  
• nothing.' I said, 'I would be grateful if you did. Please take what you want.'  
• They called the others and you should have seen this picture! The poor  
• Germans gathered from all around and were ecstatic. They took and took  
• and took. Shirts, sheets, and everything. I believe Deda Vench and Baba  
• Anya were crying.

•  
• I did not have any feelings about this, nor any guilt. I only knew one thing. If  
• we do not go forward now, we are dead ducks. And this helped. We reshuf-  
• fled the load, put Babushka back on top. Baba Anya took her place on the  
• right in her fur with the fox tail flapping to the rhythm of her steps. Deda  
• Vench went on the left. Papa and I behind. He with the dog, I with you, and  
• so we moved forward again.

•  
• We were walking through a gorgeous countryside. Sugar beet fields which,  
• at this time of year still held a slight green coating, extended far into the  
• horizon in rows. Just before we stopped for the night, I sat down a field,  
• nursing the baby. I looked up and saw the vast gray sky overhead, like an  
• inverted bowl.

•  
• The rain continued. The road got worse. We were soaking wet. Rivulets of  
• cold water ran down my back. But Olga was covered up, so she was dry.  
• Before nightfall we found it difficult to continue so we turned off to the right  
• toward a hut, or little house.

## The Singing Fellow of Dubno

The mistress here was very nice. There were already a lot of people camped in her yard, huddled under makeshift shelters, all waiting out the night.

It was becoming obvious that our horses were about to expire. The poor horses! In spite of our lightening the load, they were getting too weak to pull the cart. The one with the wheeze gasped and hacked so much that it looked as if it would drop dead at any moment right there in the harness. The other one—I think it was on the right side of the cart—was so lame that she barely hobbled along, poor thing. Her foot seemed to fold under her.

It was about four o'clock and evening was coming on. Our mood was somber. You could see it on the faces. I don't remember having any feelings at all. I felt as if I were made of stone. I only registered what was going on about me.

There was a very kind lady. We came to her house terribly wet. We entered a big room and with a table in the middle. Again, all the men were off at war and she had no idea which was alive and which was not. She had a pot of borsch made of water and a little potato with cabbage and salt. But it was hot.

'Sit, sit,' she said.

'No, no that is not necessary. We have bread and pork fat.'

She insisted. Much to my surprise, there was a young fellow there about 20 years of age who ate regularly in this woman's house. His truck stood in front of the house. He was uneducated, funny and cocky.

We started talking and immediately his face lit up and he said, "Oh, I am from Kiev too!" He was managing very well by running several clever business schemes, slipping around the fighting. The Germans gave him benzene for the truck and he made trips for them. It was easy to take advantage of the Germans.

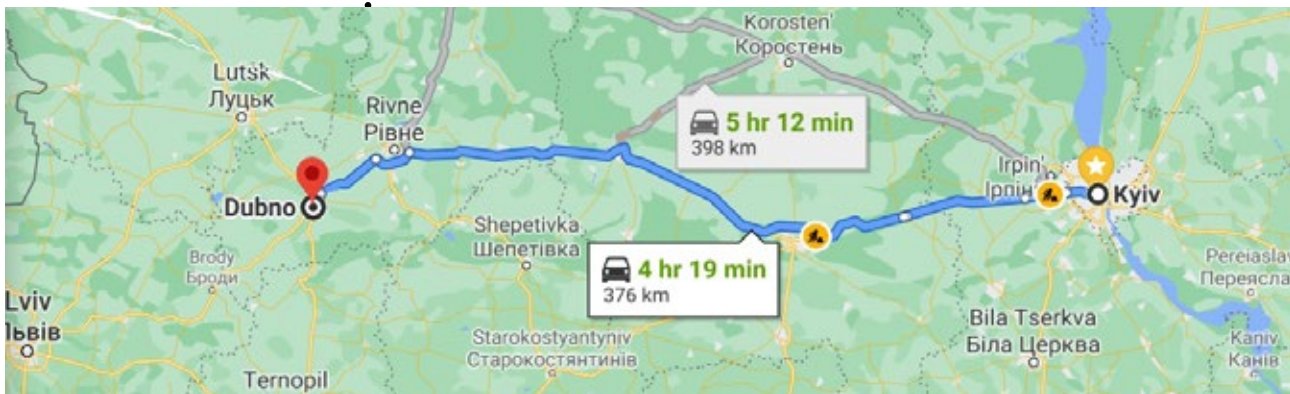
He made his trips delivering messages, supplies or people. He told us how he traveled to the villages; bought and sold things and every few trips he made one for the Germans. It turned out that he was married and had one child, both of whom he had taken to Dubno, which was outside our borders in Poland. He said that he would have to go soon and move them to another place because there was fighting approaching.

He told us there was fighting in the direction where we were heading. (The Balkans) It was under tight German control and there were uprisings, roving bands all around—Ukrainians, Polish liberators—killing right and left. So now we did not know what to do. The horses were in no condition to go on. He said, 'I'll give you a ride.'

'But we are so many and we have so much stuff.

'Everything and everyone will fit because I have the truck.'

We went out and loaded all our chests. He was right. Everything and everyone did fit in his truck. Babushka was settled in the cabin with him and the rest of us climbed inside. We left the horses and cart with the woman and went off with him. He sang heartily as he drove. "We do not sow and do not reap, just drink and eat..." And he took us to Dubno.



After several days on the road, a young Ukrainian man with a truck gave them a ride to Dubno, which was outside the borders of Ukraine in Poland. (It's now part of Ukraine). It was a distance of close to 400 km. (about 250 miles) from where they started in Kiev. Helen nicknamed him the "Singing Man," because he was always singing as he drove along. Helen and Peter did not know where, exactly, they were headed, but knew they wanted to go West, away from the Soviet Union.

It was so easy without the horses. It turned out that he was a clever fellow. He had seen in advance that things "smelled fried" (a Russian saying for things looking bad), so he had moved his wife, a peasant woman, and their little boy, who had already started to walk, out of the area of active hostilities. In comparison with Olga who lay like this (*She gestured a baby on her back arms outflung*) he seemed almost an adult.

They lived in a large rented room and we all slept on the floor. It seems they also fed us, but in times like these, food disappears from one's consciousness. You are not interested in gourmet meals. They were very kind to Babushka, and we were able to get ourselves somewhat in order. We stayed with them I think about a day. Then we had to figure out what to do next.

He said, 'The trains still are not running.' But in Kiev they never did run for anyone except the Germans, so we were used to that. Here they had trains before the war, but now these were all destroyed. Moreover, the situation was complicated by the fact that the Ukrainians were also fighting among themselves and against the Poles.

There were at least four different groups shooting at each other in the woods; the pro-Independence Ukrainians, Poles, partisans, and at least one more. They fought against each other and against the Germans. Bullets were flying in all directions. It was dangerous to travel alone.

• He said, 'There is only one way open to you. The retreating Germans march  
• in columns because there is so much shooting all around. They bring all  
• their people and supplies out with them. The columns depart at dawn from  
• a particular place outside of Dubno and travel until dusk each day. You must  
• stand on the road where they pass and try to flag them down and get a ride  
• to wherever they will take you.'

• The following morning he drove us ...bless his heart, he  
• was still singing ...to the road on the outskirts of town  
• where the columns assembled. And sure enough, the  
• Germans came organized in units—I don't know how many  
• there were, but at least several military trucks. The back  
• of each truck was covered by canvas with soft windows  
• along the side. Soldiers on motorcycles mounted with  
• machine guns rode on the left and right for protection.  
• In the cab sat two men; in case one was killed, the other  
• would grab the wheel and take over driving right away.

• Much to our relief they took us with all our baggage. Grandma was seated in  
• the cab and the rest of us and the dog climbed into the cargo bed where they  
• told us to hunch down in the center because soldiers shoot at the windows  
• if they see a head...and so we rode on. I thought any moment they would  
• start shooting at us. But we were very fortunate.

• What magnificent forests we passed through! What beauty all around us!



A photo of a canvas-sided truck with windows, such as Helen describes. The singing fellow drove them to a road outside Dubno to hitch a ride with a German convoy. It was their only way to continue as there was shooting in every direction among various warring factions. They were loaded into the truck and told to stay down, because soldiers shot at the windows if they saw a head.



The Liberation of Kiev, November 1943 (Wikipedia), the end of the Second Battle of Kiev. This was the scene several months after Helen and Peter fled their home on foot—Red Army soldiers entering the city. For them, it was not a "liberation," as they lost their homeland and were still trapped between the German and the Red Armies.



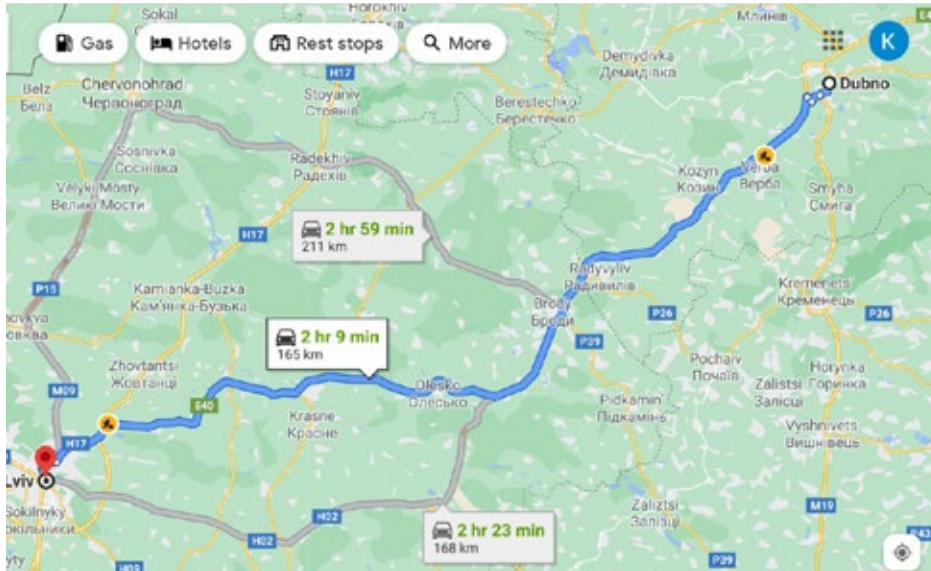
Ukrainian forests such as Helen described.  
Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Heading West: October 1943–January 1945

#### Poland



The family spent the night at the home of the “singing man” in Dubno, which is now Ukraine, but was then within Polish borders. He told them that the only way to get further west was to wait at the outskirts of town for the German convoy to pass by and try to get onto one of their trucks. They managed to do so, and hunched down in a canvas-sided truck, to avoid getting shot by soldiers who might see their heads at the window. Even in their dangerous circumstances, Helen noticed the beauty of the forests they passed through on the way.

Lvov to Katowice. Helen’s story:

• The German convoy ended up in Lvov and unloaded us on the street. We  
• were exhausted, dirty and ragged. I held Olga. The dog, Topsic, was on the  
• rope. Vasily Vench was still in his kashuk (fur coat) and grandma was  
• wobbling on the cobblestone streets, using her umbrella like a cane. There  
• were elegant houses, like New York brownstones. Walking on the street felt  
• unreal, out of body. The only reality was the child. We had some addresses  
• of Ukrainians. Spent a couple days in Lvov.

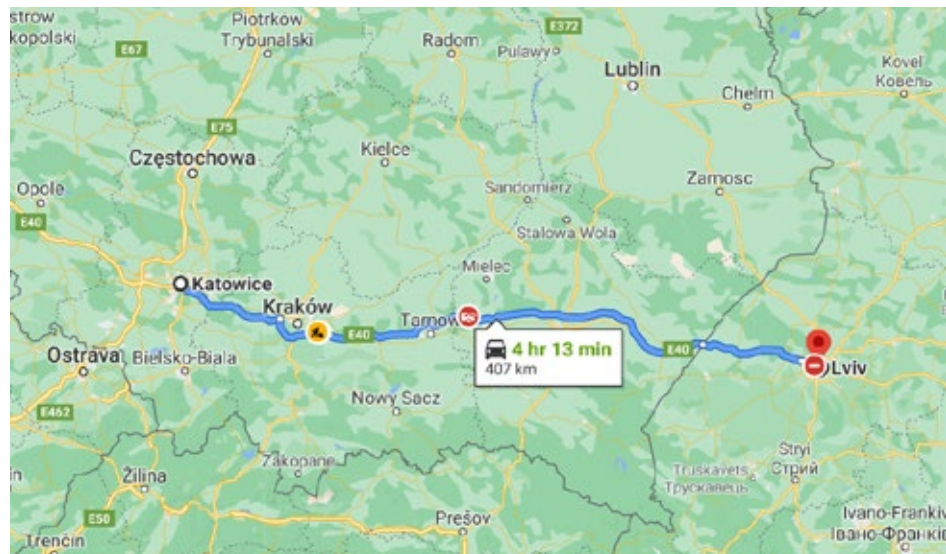
• We wanted to get as far west as we could, which meant Krakow. Trains  
• west were mostly for the army and we were told they only stopped for 2  
• or 3 minutes. *(Helen and Peter had no official permission. Helen had some  
• coffee, which was like gold, and bribed the young man in charge of the  
• train to let them on. He said he’d stop the train, and whoever gets in, fine,  
• whatever is left, ‘I can’t do anything’. They rushed through and got everyone  
• on the train).*

• We took the train from Lvov to Krakow. We unloaded all the luggage onto  
• the street. It was raining, a small drizzle. Krakow was even more European  
• than Lvov and was a gem before the Germans got there. The Poles fought the

• Germans bitterly. We were all huddled together, looking around. Everywhere  
 • you look it's a strange place. You don't know which way to go. There were  
 • people around, but not many, on business.  
 •  
 • We heard hysterical screams and saw two young women, elegantly dressed,  
 • in their 30s. One was restraining the other, who had a blank face, empty,  
 • bewildered. She was screaming, "You killed him. You killed him!"  
 •  
 • We went to search for some official place and found a Ukrainian office.  
 • Some of us stayed with the luggage. At the office, they greeted us like long  
 • lost "friends". They sent us to two places; Pop, Olga, and me to one place,  
 • Baba Lyena, Vasily Vench, and Baba Anya to another. Every day Pop and  
 • Papa went around looking for a way to keep going west.  
 •

Helen was told later that the Ukrainian Committee in the office was working for the Nazi Secret Police. The committee thought the Germans would set aside a part of Ukraine for them when the Reds were defeated.

The family continued from Lvov to Krakow by crowding onto a train, and stayed about two weeks in Krakow, trying to figure out how to keep going west. Everyone was afraid of going to Germany, where they knew people were kept for slave labor. To their dismay, they were finally ordered onto a cattle car for refugees and POWs by a German officer. They ended up at Shakova, a refugee camp surrounded by barbed wire near the industrial and mining city of Katowice, Poland. (The authors have not located this camp in the historical records, so it may have gone by a different name than Helen remembered).



## Shakova Refugee Camp

Helen continues:

•  
• Everyone was afraid to go to Germany. We  
• knew people were kept like slaves for labor  
• with a white patch on their clothes written  
• “OST”—East. They had to always keep it on  
• their clothes.

•  
• For two weeks, nothing happened. Then  
• one day a German dressed as a civilian  
• came to us and said politely that he’s a  
• German officer. ‘You are going to the Reich.  
• Be ready at six tomorrow morning.’ An  
• order. We would be taken. No questions or  
• answers. It was like an avalanche on us.

•  
• Next morning we were loaded on a train.  
• It was an irregular car. You step in the  
• compartment, the doors slide closed on the  
• outside with a metal bar and lock. We heard the lock click.

•  
• From Krakow we came to Shakova, an enormous transit camp in Poland for  
• refugees and prisoners of war, near Katowice. (*Katowice was an important  
• industrial and mining center*). We were among thousands, maybe tens of  
• thousands of refugees, escaping the Red Army advance. Each building had



This photo depicts a young woman wearing an OST label, which stood for “Ostarbeiter”—Nazi foreign slave labor, many of whom were Ukrainians and Poles. Peter describes having to wear this label on his clothes while working as a physician in Nazi-occupied Poland. Wikimedia.



Ukrainian ostarbeiters being loaded onto a train in Germany, 1942. This train is similar to the one Helen describes, that the family was ordered to board in Krakow, headed to Shakova refugee and POW camp. Helen said, ‘It was an irregular car. You step in the compartment, the doors slide closed on the outside with a metal bar and lock. We heard the lock click.’ 112.international.

100 people. This was disputed German-Polish territory—the beginning of the industrial landscape and mining. It was gray, poor, hilly, and devoid of vegetation. Barbed wire was all around. Security was tight because of the prisoners of war kept there. We were loaded onto a truck. The truck went in, and gates locked behind us.

The day we arrived was dark and miserable. I felt as though I lived in a dream. Everything was gray. There were bunk beds made of wood, with no mattresses, so we slept on coats and pillows from our baggage. A lavatory and showers. They were one story barracks. The shock was tremendous. We were told not to leave or try to leave. Later that changed. We were allowed to go in and out because we were refugees, but there were only fields all around—there was nowhere to go. At least there was no shooting here, so already that was an improvement. We had no nerves, no moods. There was nothing like that. You just do what you think you should and that's it.

The Germans had set up camps along the way wherever possible to feed and house people. There were people there from all classes – from all walks of life. Some people were like us and very kind. One woman helped me with Olga.

Olga as a baby around the time they were in Shakova, a camp for refugees and POWs in Nazi-occupied Poland. Helen describes leaving the camp area to find vegetables for the baby. A village woman gave her some carrots, which Helen grated, strained through a handkerchief, and fed to Olga. She believed that if she hadn't breast-fed Olga, the baby would have perished.



We had to go out because I had to get something to feed the baby. Of course I nursed, which saved her. Otherwise, she would have perished. It was always said that the baby needed the juice of various vegetables. So I went outside the camp to the village with Olga in my arms.

Along the way, we stopped by a beautiful little river. I sat down on the bank and laid her on my knee. On the other side a goat emerged. I made bleating sounds and she responded. We had a conversation.

We sat like this in this beautiful countryside for a long time. Later, I saw a hut and went over and said I needed a vegetable for the baby, and a woman gave me some carrots. I don't even remember the faces anymore. I brought the carrots back to the camp, grated them, and squeezed them through a handkerchief and fed her with a spoon—a silver spoon from my grandmother's prerevolutionary home.

We were always half-hungry. We had food rations. Papa (Vasily Vench) bartered possessions for food. It was a fight all day, just to arrange petty things, like getting kasha.

Pop generally avoided confrontations but in the barracks he got into a shouting match with a man who smoked in the crowded and closed space. It was hard to breathe so he went up to him and said, 'listen here, if you take opium or cocaine, that does not bother me because you are only affecting yourself. But with this smoke you are bothering others.' I don't remember how it ended.

Baba Anya was gloomy and sort of angry. She refused to do anything. It was a type of depression, a deep sadness about leaving. She just withdrew from social interaction, refused to talk or participate, and slept a lot.

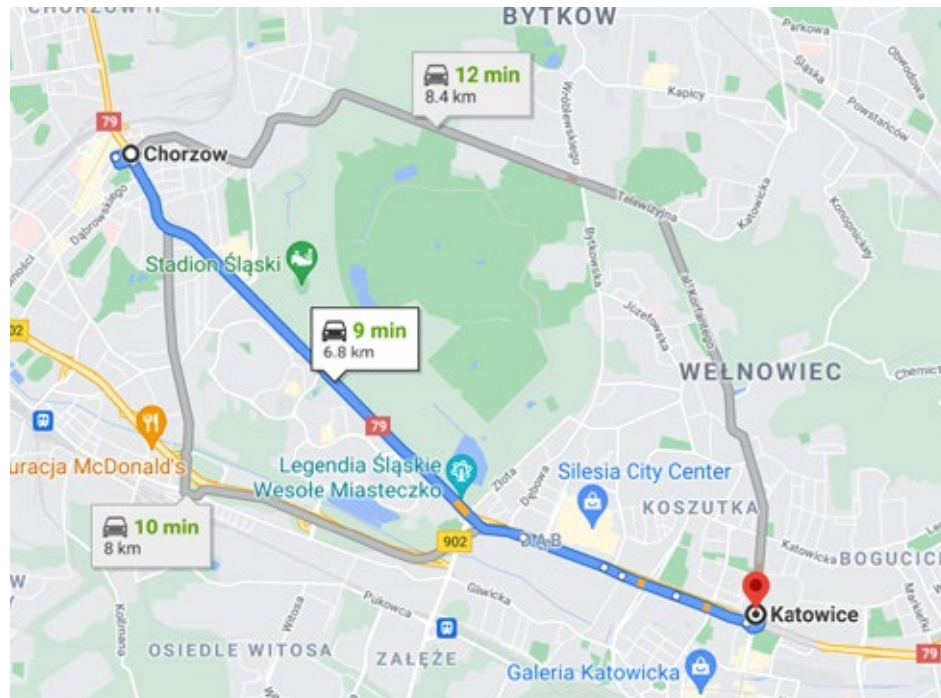
She was not a person who ever argued or raised her voice, but during these episodes, she became silent and withdrawn. These bouts of melancholy plagued her the rest of her life and probably were related to her having lived through two major wars and losing everything twice in her life. She just stopped.

The first war, World War One, was not a personal catastrophe. With us in Ukraine, it turned into the Revolution. For others, the war ended, but because of our ancestors' social position, for us it continued. We always remained the "unbeaten bourgeoisie." From the time of the Revolution onward blood continued to pour—only the aggressors kept changing. I believe Baba Anya was remarkably strong minded to have survived all that she did and still be a productive person all that time.



Baba Anya and Deda Vench (Anna and Vasily). Official photos taken from their time in Katowice (or Konigshutte), the industrial and mining district of occupied Poland. The photo of Anna shows the fatigue and sadness that Helen describes, having lost her home and way of life twice: once in the Revolution and now in the war. Nonetheless, she was a strong woman and pushed ahead.

Peter found work as a doctor in a miner's hospital in Konigshutte, now called Chorzow, Poland, several miles from Shakova camp and the family moved there. He treated only Poles and Ukrainians, most of whom worked in heavy industry, since as an untermensch (a racially inferior person) he was not supposed to treat Germans. Anna worked as a mining engineer. The local population hated the Nazis but were also against the communists.



## Konigshutte

Helen's description:

- Pop went into neighboring towns to try to get work. Since there was a
- shortage of doctors, eventually he got a position in a miner's hospital in
- Konigshutte. (Now called Chorzow, Poland. Knowing German saved him,
- just as it had earlier. Also, he stressed his Greek heritage, which was safer in
- Germany than being Slavic). This was a Polish region. The local population
- was made of mostly Poles who worked in heavy industry or mining. They
- had been under the Germans for several years and hated them, but they
- were also against the communists. Pop treated only Poles and Ukrainians.
- Germans were treated by German doctors.
- 

Helen describing Russian POWs she saw in occupied Poland:

- We had no radio that could pick up transmissions from outside and tell
- us what was going on in the world. Our people passed some information
- by word of mouth, but it was extremely dangerous and we had to keep our
- ethnic background and connections to other immigrants secret.
- 
- I remember. I have a photograph which was taken at the exact time when
- they brought Russian prisoners of war into the garden. Olga is sitting
- happily naked on a raincoat. That photo was taken in the garden of the
- Erste Casino.
-

T r a d u c t i o n .

Hôpital  
"Knappschafts- Krankenhaus"  
Königshütte- Haute Silésie.

A t t e s t a t i o n .

Nous certifions, par la présente, que M. Peter STAVRAKY  
docteur en médecine, né le 12 mars 1917 à Kiew, demeurant  
à Königshütte, Haute- Silésie, Lazarettstrasse 11, exerce  
la fonction de médecin interne de notre hôpital "Knapp-  
schafts-Krankenhaus" depuis le 16 novembre 1943.

Königshütte, le 3 mars 1944.

L' administration

de l'hôpital "Knappschafts-Krankenhaus"

signé: (signature illisible).-

Die Richtigkeit vorstehender Übersetzung aus der deutschen  
in die französische Sprache bescheinigt und beglaubigt,

Je, soussigné, traducteur juré près le Tribunal de Première  
Instance de Beuthen/Kattowitz certifie la traduction qui pré-  
cède conforme à l'original écrit en langue allemande et par  
moi signé:

Kattowitz, le 5 mars 1944.

Kattowitz, den 5. März 1944.

**Otto Matuschek**

Verordneter Dolmetscher  
der französischen u. polnischen Sprache  
f. d. Gerichte des Landgerichtsbezirks Beuthen/Kattowitz  
Mitglied der Reichsanwaltschaftsgemeinschaft für das Dol-  
metscherwesen.  
Kattowitz O.-S., Zethovenstrasse 2/3  
Hof 7/603

*Matuschek*

A statement attesting to Peter's employment at the miner's hospital (Knappschafts-Krankenhaus) in Königshütte (now Chorzów) starting November 16, 1943. He treated only Poles and Ukrainians who worked in the mines and heavy industry; as a Ukrainian he was not allowed to treat Germans. The population was ardently anti-Nazi, but also anti-communist.

Official photos of Peter and Helen, evidently taken for documents, from their time in Königshütte, approximately November 1943–January 1945.









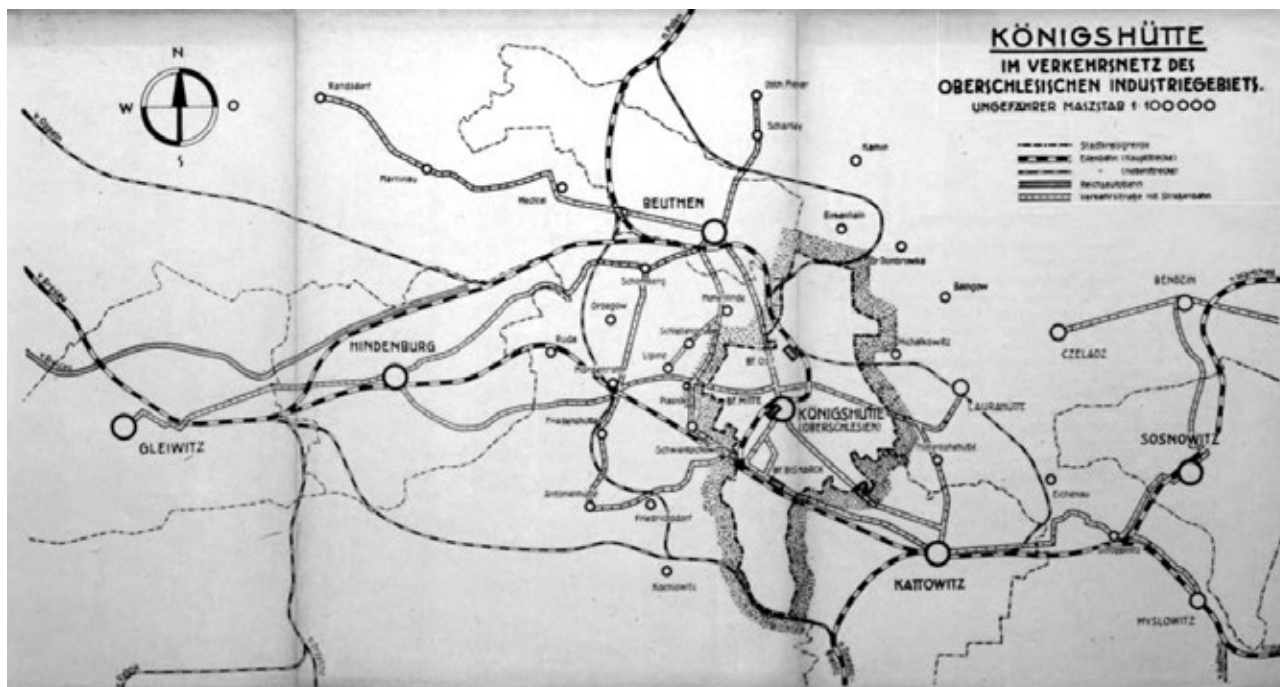
These photos depict Konigshutte at night, and the industrial landscape where it was situated. The family lived in Konigshutte, which was in occupied Poland, for about a year and a half. Helen described the 'thick, black air and tall pipes between buildings. The sediment settled on you'.



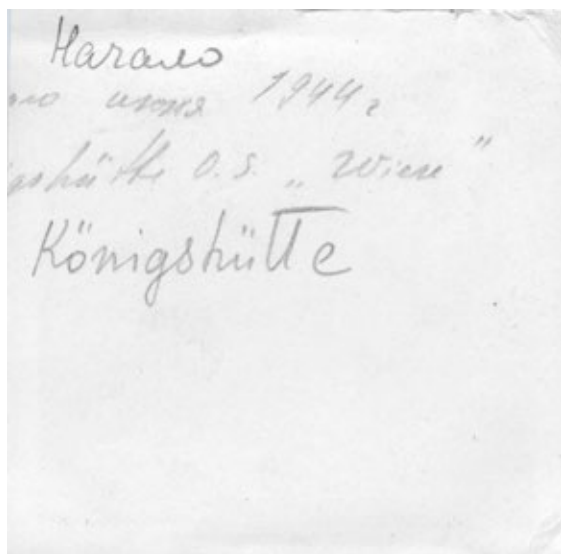
•  
• But Pop, Olga, and I were in a German sphere (*on hospital grounds in a dormitory for Polish doctors*) in full view. Everyone stared at us. We spoke only German. I also spoke German fluently, like Papa. We were told later that people who worked there cleaning, a girl called Heidi who brought diapers for the baby, and others, were spies for the Nazis. They listened in on us through cracks at the bottom of the door to see if they could catch us speaking Russian. They never did.

•  
• When the old folks came to visit we were subdued and careful. Papa (*Vasily Ivanovich*) kept on dressing as a peasant, the way he did in Kiev, which was risky. You had to be of a class, as foreigners, that was appealing to Germans.

•  
• Pop did well in the hospital for miners. (*On Lazaretstrasse #11 which in Polish means "Field Hospital Street"*). Everyone was happy with him.



A map of Königshutte, ca. 1941



Back of photo inscribed Königshutte, 1944.



Olga and her great-uncle Sergey Grigorievich Britchkin outside the miner's hospital in Königshutte.



These photos were taken outside the miner's hospital where Peter worked. They show a visit by Sergey, Anna's brother and Baba Lyena's youngest son. (Helen's uncle). This was the first time Lyena had seen Sergey since he fled Kiev in 1918 with the White Army (Tsar's army) at the age of 15, and ended up first in Czechoslovakia, later in Paris, and finally in the US. He became an accomplished engineer, but died in his early 50s. It would also be the last time Lyena saw him. Her two older sons, Ivan and Nikolai, she never saw again from the time they left Kiev in 1918.

Sergey, Baba Lyena, Anna, Helen, Vasily Ivanovich, Olga, Peter.



Helen, Peter, Anna and Vasily, Olga, and Lyena in Konigshutte. ca. 1944. In the photo with Lyena, Peter, and Olga you can spot a nurse in the background. This was taken outside the miner's hospital.





Photos of Olga as a baby and her parents, Helen and Peter, in Konigshutte.









Helen describes life in Konigshutte

•  
• We did not have any additional sources of food, so we remained always  
• a little hungry, but the main problem we now faced was the approach of  
• winter. That summer (1944) the bombing started. When the sirens went  
• off, we all had to leave our rooms and go to the shelter. They had special  
• officials to check that all the houses were evacuated. In June 1944, Olga got  
• measles and almost died. I remember sitting in the room with her lying on  
• my lap, suffering severe convulsions. Papa was with patients. I just sat there  
• thinking she was going to die, when a military man came to check on us. I  
• did not care about bombs. If my child was going to die, I wanted to die with  
• her. Maybe a bomb would take us both at once. "I cannot go anywhere. The  
• child is gravely ill," I explained.

•  
• He looked at the unmoving baby on my knees, said, "All right," and disap-  
• peared. We remained listening to the sounds of the bombs all around us.  
• They started with a whine that grew louder as the bomb came closer, and  
• then came the "Boom!" with a slight tremor. Olga asked, "What is this boom-  
• boom?" For the next year and a half, we lived in the middle of violence.

•  
• This particular winter, which was our second year, was extremely harsh,  
• one of those rare severe winters (1944–1945). There was snow and blizzards.  
• We seemed to have just settled in and started to revive a little bit when the  
• winter offensive began. Encouraged and supported by England and the  
• Americans, the Russians started a big push westward and the Germans  
• were soon under attack from all sides.

•  
• In the meantime, we followed events the best we could with anxiety, not  
• knowing what would happen to us. The Germans allowed no news. If the  
• Soviets managed to defeat the Germans, we were all as good as dead. At two  
• years old, Olga got pneumonia. (*In January 1945*). She had 104 temperature  
• and there was no penicillin. She suffered.

More family photos from Konigshute. The last two, of Peter, and Baba Lyena, seem to be taken for official documents. Baba Lyena looks very aged and not well. She was around 70 years old at the time of this picture but looks older. She died only a few years later. The medical care she needed, in the midst of war, was not available to her.



Peter's story of the miner's accident.

- 
- As you know, we lived in Germany for 2 years during the war. I worked in a
- big hospital for miners and their families. There was a total of 13 mines in
- the east German area of Oberschlesian.
- 
- 



The Miner's Hospital where Peter worked in Konigshutte shortly after it was built, 1904.

- 
- As usual I worked as a surgeon under direction of an older doctor Maak (or
- Mach), who was well liked in the area for many years. He also hated Hitler.
- 
- 
- It was a lot of work and occasionally some young physician came to help
- and stayed for a short time. Dr. Maak was not young and very depressed
- because he lost two sons in the war, both physicians. One day bad news
- arrived. There had been an explosion underground. Five miners were
- trapped. Immediate rescue efforts were initiated; however, it took four days
- to free the men. Fortunately, there were no poisonous gases, and this helped
- in the rescue work.
- 
- 
- On the fourth day, I was called to the area. Four men arrived by elevator,
- the fifth did not come. My examination revealed no abnormalities. It was
- surprising because the men had no food or water for four days. They were
- admitted to the hospital for observation.
- 
- 
- I spoke with the miners and they reported the following: Shortly after the
- explosion the lights went out and they examined their 'prison.' The space
- was only about 2-2.5 ft high but fairly wide. The sad discovery was made
- that one of the miners was buried in fragments of coal and passed away
- 
-

•  
•  
• immediately. The other four waited patiently for rescue without any food or  
•  
•  
• water.

•  
• Here is the unusual part: On the next day, the owner of the mine arrived  
•  
• at the hospital and visited the four miners. He was a 'baron'—news which  
•  
• surprised me because Hitler appropriated all private property. I had to  
•  
• accompany him during the visit. He spoke briefly to the miners and placed  
•  
• a gift for each by his bed. The gift was just a cheap arrangement of artificial  
•  
• flowers!

A coal mine in Königshütte, called Grafín Laura (Countess Laura). A German postcard before 1919.



The same coal mine in Chorzow, Poland, formerly Königshütte, which now serves as an automobile repair shop. Photo taken 2017. Wikipedia, Adian Tync, photographer.



CHAPTER FOUR

From Konigshutte to Athens

Last train out of Konigshutte/Katowice

Helen's story.

• The Red Army was approaching from the east. We knew people were trying to leave on trains, though there was no official evacuation. It was secret. You had to have permission from the command. You couldn't say you want to run because that would mean you doubted the power of the Reich. Papa managed to get permission because Olga still was sick with pneumonia. We took her out in the cold air. We couldn't waste any time.

• On January 18, 1945, we quickly packed all the belongings we still had left—pictures, rugs, silver in a case, that we had brought—and rolled the luggage onto a carriage. These possessions were all we had left of our life and our home. All of us were there, including the dog. Ours was the next station past the main terminal and when the train pulled up we saw it was already full. This was the last train. If we didn't get on, that would be the end for us. Baba Lyena couldn't lift herself up. Pop and Baba Anya grabbed her. I was holding Olga.

• I grabbed Baba Lyena's large triangular scarf that she wore around her shoulders, tied it on my back and filled it with family photographs. The scarf had been a present Pop and I brought her from our trip to Crimea in 1936, woven by a peasant woman. We pushed and elbowed our way onto the train. I looked around. Miraculously everyone was there—Baba Lyena wearing her hat, as always. But as the train pulled out I saw our belongings still on the platform. People tried to help. They threw the stroller into the train car, stuffed with pillows, and a few other bundles. I saw my black case with silver on top. And Topsis was still on the platform, tied with a rope, waiting for us. We had to leave him and we hoped someone would take him in. He was an intelligent dog.



This diagram shows the Soviet offensive advancing on Pomerania and Silesia from February 8-April 4, 1945. The family fled from Konigshutte (now Chorzow, Poland) on January 18, 1945. They were a few miles from Katowice, which is circled in yellow near the bottom of the page. The red arrows indicate the direction of the Red Army and clearly show the area they had lived overtaken by the Soviets within a month after they left.—История Второй Мировой Войны 1939-1943. History of World War Two 1939-1943.

•  
• We were packed in so tight you couldn't go to the bathroom. Baba Lyena was  
• incontinent by this time. There were mostly Germans on the train, no Poles,  
• since they had nothing to lose from the communists. We tried not to talk, or  
• to speak only in German. If they knew we were Russian, they would have  
• lynched us. The German ladies were wearing two or three fur coats and all  
• their gold chains. Their suitcases were tightly packed. Olga had nothing to  
• eat. I made hot chocolate for her and overheard a German say "Some people  
• have nothing to eat and others drink chocolate in front of them." They  
• looked at us with hate.

•  
• I was numb. We had had lost all our material possessions, except the photo-  
• graphs.

•  
• Word had spread that there was no room for passengers at the next station,  
• which was the last stop. When we rode up, we saw Germans sitting on the  
• steps, waiting. Women rushed up and threw children with name tags onto  
• the train. We grabbed children through windows. Red Cross nurses came to  
• try to round up howling babies. Many years later a picture flashed on tv of  
• that same scene and I recognized it.

•  
• I thought how fortunate we were. I had my child. Even though we had just  
• lost all our material, precious stuff, it was not life. Life was in us and we  
• were all together.

Potsdam train station—the children. Helen continues.

•  
• We came to Potsdam, outside Berlin, at nightfall. Snow started to fall. I stood  
• on the platform like in a trance. I felt only the value of whatever we had—  
• possibilities, freedom. We unloaded and saw the stroller with the pillows. I  
• put Olga in the stroller and covered her.

•  
• It was an unusually bad winter. The Germans received an Ordnung-order- to  
• close the waiting room at 8 pm and it was full of children from the train. All  
• of them were set outside. We had addresses of friends from Kiev.

Note: Anna, Baba Lyena, and Deda Vench went with the Simensovs; Tamara Bogatrchuk took Helen, Peter, and Olga. These were friends from Kiev.

•  
• They had rooms in apartments. The other residents of the building were  
• mainly intellectuals, like Frau Gizecke, who was formal but pleasant and  
• kind. She was of the nobility class, most of whom were against Hitler. Olga  
• was two and a half by then and spoke only German. She started to recover  
• from pneumonia and perked up.







## Camp Lautenthal and Clausthal-Zellerfeld

Helen describes the refugee camp.

- 
- We moved from Potsdam into the Harz Mountain area, to Camp Lautenthal, near the town of Clausthal-Zellerfeld, about 90 km from Hanover. Hanover was bombed day and night. There was nothing left but a pile of rubble—not a house remaining. Just the spike of one cathedral. People moved underground into cellars and cleaned walks through the rubble. Stores functioned in cellars. Pop went there from the camp to look for work.
- 
- We got to the barracks camp cold, hungry, and tired. The camp was cleaner than Shakova and there was no barbed wire. We were fed, but not enough. Most of the people there were OST arbeiter, workers brought to Germany from other countries to work as forced labor. They had a tag of white cloth on their clothes that read OST. That marked them as “untermenschen”—the underclass. If the Germans had won they’d have done with us as with the Jews.
- 
- Winter in the Harz Mountains was like picture postcards—all snow covered. It was wooded with fields between. In spring there were big daisies, bachelor buttons, swaying in the wind. The fields were covered with heather, a whitish lavender color. In peacetime these places were resorts.
- 
- It was cold. I held Olga at the window. Outside, the snow was beautiful and peaceful. Inside it was quite different. Pop went by train to the city of Clausthal, about 19km away from the camp. His shoes had worn out and his toes stuck out of them. His feet were wet.
- 

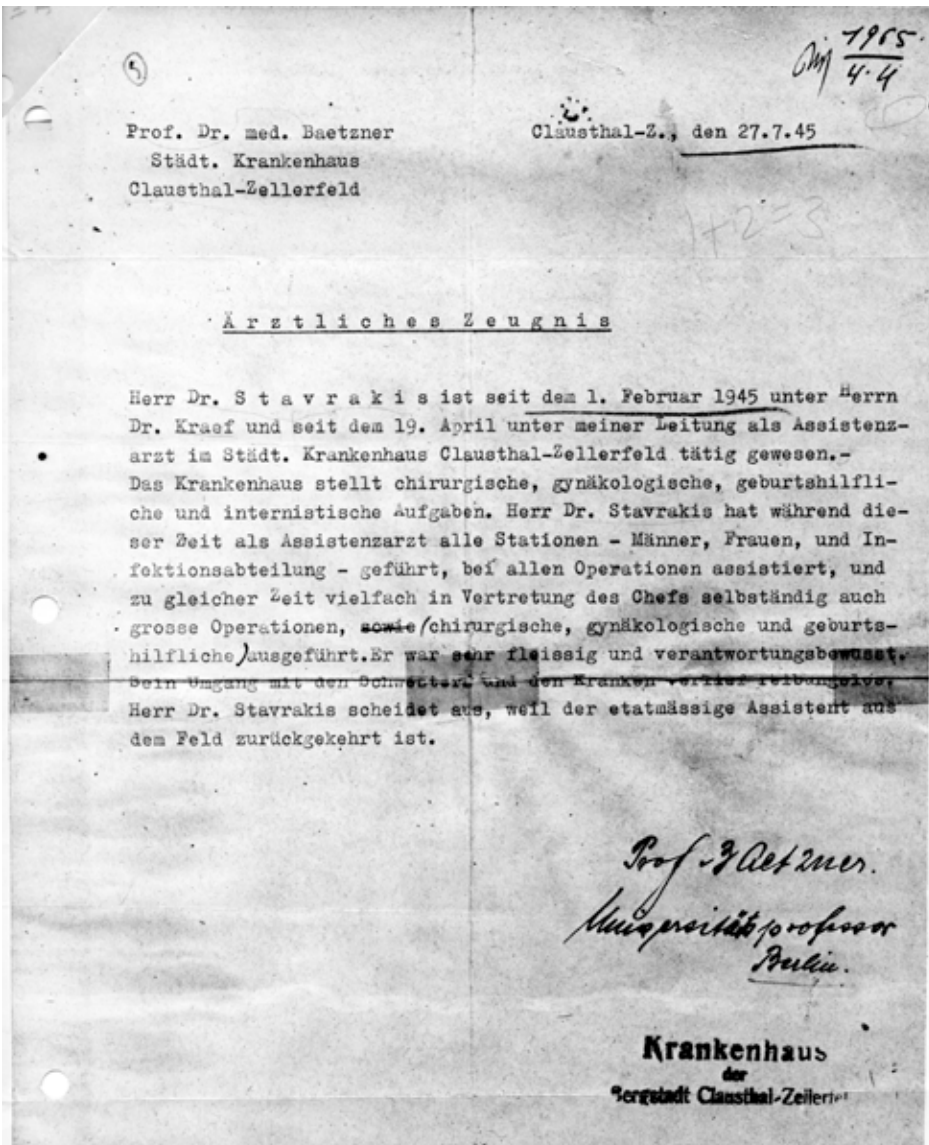


The family was taken from Potsdam to Camp Lautenthal in the Harz Mountains. Despite the cold and hunger, Helen appreciated the beauty of the surroundings. Outside, the snow was beautiful and peaceful. Inside the camp it was a different story.





Dr. Kraef, the director, was a member of the Nazi party, but he needed doctors badly, so after Peter demonstrated his ability, he got work at the hospital. When the Red Army approached, Dr. Kraef decided to leave to save his skin. In his place they put another doctor, Dr. Baetzner, an apolitical professor of surgery from Berlin who was a famous specialist.



Statement of Peter's employment in Clausthal at the Krankenhaus Klinik.

Helen describing Clausthal-Zellerfeld.

Clausthal-Zellerfeld refers to two towns that merged in 1924. It was a little town near the highest point of the Harz Mountains, very pretty. The people were proud that the famous Robert Koch, the discoverer of the bacillus named after him, was born there. The town of Altenau is just to the east. We lived there under the constant scare of bombs.

The houses were tall and narrow. The backyards were small but they grew everything they could. On the bottom floor was the Fechner family—parents and a little boy. Frau Langlotz, a dentist, lived on the second floor but also rented a tiny apartment on the third floor where her mother lived until her death. She was asked to rent it to the new doctor, "For the fatherland." She couldn't refuse.

We occupied the third-floor apartment, which was three small rooms heated with a coal stove. Frau Langlotz lent us some pots and pans and gave us featherbeds. She had no children and came to love Olga very much. I sewed all our clothing from donated and discarded pieces. In Konigshute I had made a jacket, little suit, and pants for Olga out of Papa's wool underwear, and a dress and pants for her from a cotton housecoat my mother had made for me when I married. It was all sewn by hand—there was no sewing machine. I cleaned Papa's shirts and ironed them with a coal iron. His shoes were ragged and his toes were sticking out. At work they gave him coupons to get shoes at the store.

We were now in the last year of the war. (1945) We heard sirens day and night. First came the Warnung—Take Cover! This announced an approaching bombardment. There was a different siren for the Entwarnung—All Clear. When we heard the Warnung siren we ran into the cellar of an old house built into the side of a nearby mountain as part of a mine. It had big, steep steps leading to a dark stone basement. A safe place.

Once I went to get herring. I could hear the artillery 15-20 km away. Suddenly the alarm went off and shooting started. I started running back, with the artillery shooting all around me like a cannon. I clutched the herring and ran close to houses, jumping from one house to another. I didn't want to be killed and leave my child alone.

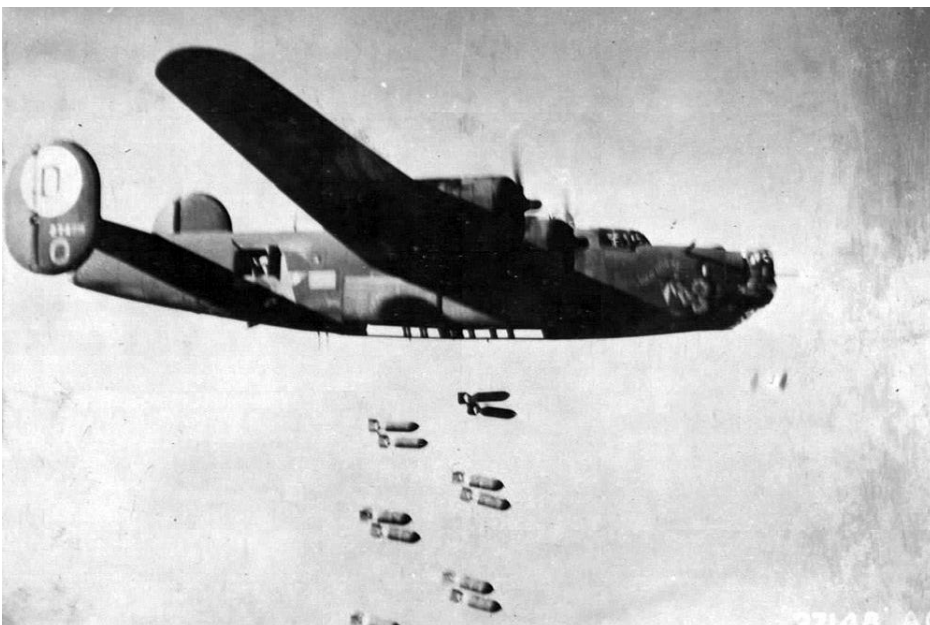
Toward the end of the war, it seemed we were bombed day and night. The planes came between 11-12 at night and once again at noon. Every raid went on for a couple of hours. When the bombers come in the day the sky is a mass of planes, like an approaching storm. You can hear the buzz of the planes in the distance. When they are directly overhead you do not hear

• the buzz. There is a short silence, then comes the whine as the bomb drops  
 • through the sky towards its target. When it hits the ground you feel, then  
 • hear the impact of the explosion followed by shockwaves, unless, of course,  
 • you are the one hit. Then you don't hear anything. You just die.

• At night the sky lit up like daylight—we could see the planes coming from  
 • many kilometers away even before we could hear them. You don't sleep at  
 • night and you get exhausted. Sometimes we thought maybe we should just  
 • let ourselves get killed.



United States Airforce planes bombing Salzburg.



The 579th Strategic missile squadron flew combat missions over Nazi Germany and Occupied Europe until the German surrender in May 1945. Wikipedia. This photo and the one above show the kind of planes that were bombarding Clausthal while the family hid there in cellars. As Helen described: "When they are directly overhead you do not hear the buzz. There is a short silence, then comes the whine as the bomb drops through the sky towards its target. When it hits the ground you feel, then hear the impact of the explosion followed by shockwaves, unless, of course, you are the one hit. Then you don't hear anything. You just die."



• We started to work. One body after the other was brought into the bright  
• light on the stretcher and we completed the work fast. It was not easy to  
• determine the cause of death; the people died most of the time from the  
• effect of the blast, I suppose. Some of the dead people impressed me more  
• than the rest and I think I should describe them in some more detail.

• One was a body of a China man in his forties. No evidence of injury, nicely  
• dressed and neat. I understand he was a very capable engineer working  
• in town. He was crossing the street when the bomb hit. And finally there  
• was a 70 year old man. During the examination of his body my helper left  
• for a short time. I remained alone and went to turn him onto his side. To  
• my dismay a very strange sound came out of his mouth... For a moment I  
• thought he was alive.

• It shook me up and I moved the body again and again and only then  
• confirmed what I already had concluded: the man was dead and the sound  
• was made by a change in the position of the dead body.

• Late in the evening the work was done and I returned to my usual task:  
• treating live patients!

• I forgot about the dead instantly but now after all these years I still  
• remember all this clearly... like yesterday.



Hitler killed in battle: a false headline. Towards the end of the war, rumors were rampant.

The final bombing of Clausthal. Helen. (*Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945 and Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 8, 1945*).

•  
•  
• It was April, 1945. The days were clear and we emerged from the cellar.  
• I looked up at the sky. It was an alien sky, not deep and warm like our  
• Ukrainian sky, but a cold shiny blue with birds like streaks of silver. I went  
• back down to the cellar and thought what I would give to lie down in my  
• own bed and sleep and sleep.  
•

• Ten days before the war ended another Warnung sounded. Something  
• peculiar was going on. and there was a notification from the mayor (Bur-  
• germeister)—he gave orders to prepare for a final attack on the city and  
• everyone was ordered to the cellars. Papa's first aid station was transferred  
• to the cellar of a hotel and Olga and I went to join him there. The streets  
• were deserted. In the hotel cellar people were sitting on benches against the  
• walls. Olga danced around and one lady sang to her. She would say, "What's  
• this boom-boom?"  
•

• They told us to stay put and not stick our noses outside, but a woman had  
• sneaked upstairs and artillery hit her. She was carried back in with her leg  
• crushed and turned all the way around. Olga asked why her leg was sticking  
• out like that and Papa tried to calm her. There was blood on the street and  
• on the steps where she had been wounded.  
•

• Meanwhile, we didn't know that the city council was meeting with the SS  
• group at the same time. The Americans put conditions to the SS unit. If they  
• give themselves up, the city is spared. The council begged the soldiers to  
• give themselves up, but the answer was No!  
•

• All this time we could hear artillery and noise. It was 12 o'clock at night and  
• we expected the end—a final bombing. We got into a corner, with our knees  
• facing each other, overlapping, and put Olga in the middle so we would  
• all be killed with one shot. She was asleep. We could hear bombers in the  
• distance. Everyone was still. There was a half hour of total silence. Quiet.  
•

• Suddenly there was a commotion—noise, footsteps, people coming.  
• American GI's burst into the room. They were very young, flushed with  
• excitement and fear, like people who had lost their minds, and carrying  
• machine guns. A GI of not more than twenty came straight to Papa and  
• held a machine gun to his chest. Papa didn't move. If he had, he would've  
• been finished. A nurse quickly translated, "This is our physician. Hospital  
• over there." The GI looked around the cellar and saw the terrified women  
• and children and the wounded woman. He realized that we were mostly a  
• motley crowd of people ready to die. The soldiers left.  
•





were talking in Russian. I was terrified—afraid she'd speak in Russian. I dragged her home, running all the way.

To our dismay, America started to give away more territories to the Russians. We found out they gave away German research institutions doing rocketry. Big trains came from the USSR, loaded people, apparatus, etc. and took them to Moscow. We heard that a special city was built for them 30 km north of Moscow. To us, this was inexplicable.



A Soviet space stamp from 1964. To Helen and Peter's dismay, America gave away German research institutions doing rocketry to the Soviets. Trains came and loaded scientists, apparatus, etc. and took them to Moscow. They found this inexplicable. The stamp says, "Glory to the Soviet People—the victors! The pathway to the stars is paved by the communists!"

The Russian occupation was bad. We were only eight km from the demarcation line—the boundary between the American and British armies and the Red Army. First it was 22 km., then it went down to eight. But we didn't panic. We were disciplined and kept a low profile.

Foreigners were going home. There was a mass of people of all nationalities, displaced and homeless. Americans lent supplies; medicine, food, and other aid. Belongings were sterilized with steam and people were sent to baths with disinfectant soap for lice.

Still in Germany were Ostarbeiters—Ukrainians, Poles, and Balkans, many of whom were brought from their home countries as forced labor, Soviet POW's, and others from the USSR trying to escape Stalin. It was an unfortunate situation, to say the least. Russia wanted all the Russians left on German territory. The Americans said whoever won't return to "their country" must be a traitor and handed these people over to the Soviets.

Author's note: This was repatriation and was in accordance with the Yalta Conference of February 4-11, 1945 attended by Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill.

Helen said, "The allies gave everything away to 'Uncle Joe.'"

We knew that a forced return would mean death or at the very least imprisonment and torture in labor camps. In the American zone, the Red Army soldiers were allowed to come in and take Russian people. Those who could hide, did. People jumped on trucks to get out of the American zone. Whole families stayed in the woods, living like animals. Some committed suicide. We were in the English zone. The English refused the Red Army and said that no one under the protection of Her Majesty the Queen would be taken. We were constantly afraid that the line of demarcation would be moved closer again.



At the Yalta Conference, February 4-11, 1945, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill agreed to repatriate refugees back to the Soviet Union. This would have meant certain imprisonment or death for the family. As Helen said ironically, "The Allies gave everything away to 'Uncle Joe'".



Berlin, Soviet Sector. Both of these photos are stills from a video taken of Berlin at the end of the war, as the city was divided into different sectors. These two show the Soviet sector. The first is a large banner of Stalin, and the second shows a sign stating "Glory to the Great Stalin!" At the Yalta conference, the Allies agreed to forced repatriation, eg. sending all refugees from the USSR back to the Soviet Union, which would mean certain death. Helen and Peter tried desperately to stay out of the Soviet zone, which these photos chillingly depict.



The British sector, from a video of Berlin at the end of the war. Helen and Peter tried to stay in the British sector. The Americans were returning refugees forcibly to the Soviet Union, but according to Helen, the British wouldn't allow it and turned away the Red Army soldiers, stating that "No one under the protection of Her Majesty the Queen would be taken." She said that "People jumped on trucks to get out of the American zone...whole families stayed in the woods, living like animals. Some committed suicide. We were in the English zone..."





Video stills from a film in Berlin at the end of the war. The first depicts Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill and the second says, in Russian, "Europe is Free!". Of course, for the refugees who could not return to the country of origin, freedom had not yet arrived. All the film stills above are from The Berlin Channel, produced by Kronos Media.



Helen.

It was important to be Greek to avoid repatriation. The old folks couldn't speak anything but Russian. It was hard to load Baba Lyena—it took several people to lift her. The Greeks helped us. By that time I was pregnant. I didn't want Olga to be alone. There was no medical care available on the trucks and I worried about a miscarriage.

Once, when we were waiting for the transport south somebody asked, "Are you Greek?" I could hear the train coming in the background. They asked me a question and said, "How do you answer that in the Greek language?" I don't know how but I knew the word in ancient Greek. Actually, it wasn't right, but I waved and got away fast.

### Red Star Camp. Helen's story.

We rode south on trucks for a long time, the whole day. Then there was a mix-up and a near disaster. The driver couldn't find the camp we were going to on the map. Finally, we came to a huge gate with a red star, a hammer and sickle, and Russian guards. We nearly died when we saw that. Twenty minutes passed but it seemed like years. The gates opened. We heard the guards say, "Where are you going?" and the driver got out. They checked the documents. We huddled in the trucks, quiet. I whispered to Olga, "Don't say anything." The driver got back and said, "It's the wrong camp!" The truck backed up and went on down the road. It was like waiting for our execution. In an hour, we came to another camp, a western one, with no gates. The people were friendly. It was entirely different. We were tremendously shaken. At the camp it was the same routine. Wash, climb into bunk beds.



At one point in the long trip south, there was a near disaster. The driver couldn't find the right camp on the map, and they came to a huge gate with a red star, a hammer and sickle, and Russian guards. The guards checked everyone's documents, while Helen tried to keep Olga quiet, in case she spoke in Russian. 20 minutes passed, but it seemed like an eternity. Finally, they were sent on their way and arrived at a Western camp, with no gates, and where the people were friendly—an entirely different scenario. They were all tremendously shaken. Wikimedia Commons.





•  
•  
• tablecloths. We never saw this in Kiev, either. It seemed everything was  
•  
• glistening. There were mounds of bright colored fruit in the stores, and  
•  
• chocolates. It was overwhelming.  
•



After a long and harrowing trip south from Germany, the family ended up in Lago di Como, Italy and were housed in an old monastery before being transported to Greece. The two weeks they stayed there were like heaven to them. This is a current photo of Lake Como and surroundings. JoyBorg.own work, Public Domain.

•  
•  
• We were met by a nice Italian doctor and were housed in an old monastery.  
•  
• They gave us a separate room and one for the old folks. A maid delivered  
•  
• food three times a day and we slept in a bed with sheets. Olga started to  
•  
• perk up again. The place was like a castle to me. We stayed two weeks and  
•  
• rested body and soul.  
•

•  
•  
• Papa was offered work in Italy, and I wanted to stay there, but he had been  
•  
• getting letters from his cousin Shura (Alexander) in Greece saying how  
•  
• wonderful things were there and begging him to come join his family. Papa  
•  
• was determined go to Greece.  
•

Author's note: They had no idea the dangerous circumstances Greece was in. The Soviet Union was pushing to get Greece. The Greek Communists were aligned with Yugoslavia and Albania and a bloody Civil War was raging between the communists and the Greek government that lasted from 1945-1949. There was martial law and there were guerillas all around the countryside.

They also didn't know that Shura completely misrepresented his living situation. He described the place as beautiful and peaceful, with good opportunities. But even if they had known the facts, it's difficult to say whether staying in Italy would have been better. The fear of being repatriated to the USSR was always driving their decisions.



Helen and Peter arranged her parents' passage to Athens. They arrived on April 7, 1947. Helen kept her grandmother, Baba Lyena, close to her throughout the voyage.



Anna and Vasily sent these photos to Olga when she, Helen, Peter, and Baba Lyena were already in Greece and they were still in an UNRRA (United Nations) Displaced Persons camp in Italy. It depicts a stuffed toy Anna made for Olga and is addressed, "To our little piglet." The photo is dated April 6, 1946. They finally got clearance to join the rest of the family in Greece a year later, in April, 1947.

Дорогой нашей поросятке  
 "Томас Поня" посылаем поздрав-  
 ления и много внимания.  
 Ваш дядя  
 в Апрель Здравствуй Олень!  
 1946г. Скоро я тебе приеду из Милана  
 и Словении. Они все уже всемог  
 в Брашов и Венути возле Поня  
 Ксения и ее сестра Дедька и т.д.

ПРИВЕТ ОЛЕГЕ  
 БАБА АНЯ И КО

UNRA CAMP in  
 Italy  
 DP Camp  
 Baba Anya made  
 teddy bear -  
 sign  
 while Mom + Pop were  
 in Greece already

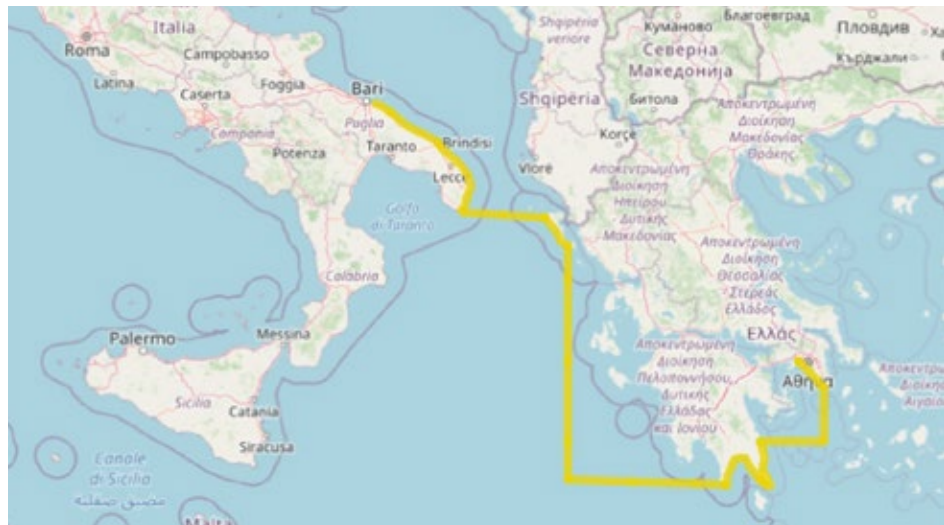
## Boat Trip from Bari to Piraeus—Storm— December 4, 1945. Helen.

In Bari, we were loaded onto a little boat. (Helen, Peter, Olga, and Baba Lyena). There was one big compartment with two levels of berths and benches squeezed underneath. Baba Lyena got a bench to sit on, and Olga and I got one berth. Everyone else was on deck with the luggage, which we had to keep an eye on. We were packed in like sardines. There was no food, but we bought a couple of oranges.

That night there was a thunderstorm with terrible thunder and lightning. The Greeks say, "The dam of the skies opened!" The waves were gigantic and the boat tipped up and down and sideways. It's very rhythmic—you count from 1-8 and get sick on 8. I gave Olga a piece of orange and made a game of it. "When you feel sick, suck an orange." It seemed to calm her. I was gagging. I had no food in my stomach.

Baba Lyena couldn't get to a bathroom and peed herself. I didn't see Pop and I just felt submission. No fear, no fighting. We made it to Piraeus (the Athens port), but we had come very close to drowning.

This is the route of the boat trip from Bari, Italy, to Piraeus, the port city of Athens. There was a terrible thunder and lightning storm with gigantic waves. Helen, Peter, Olga, and Baba Lyena were on the boat and came very close to drowning, but they made it to Athens. Anna and Vasily had to stay in the refugee camp in Italy and joined them a year and a half later.



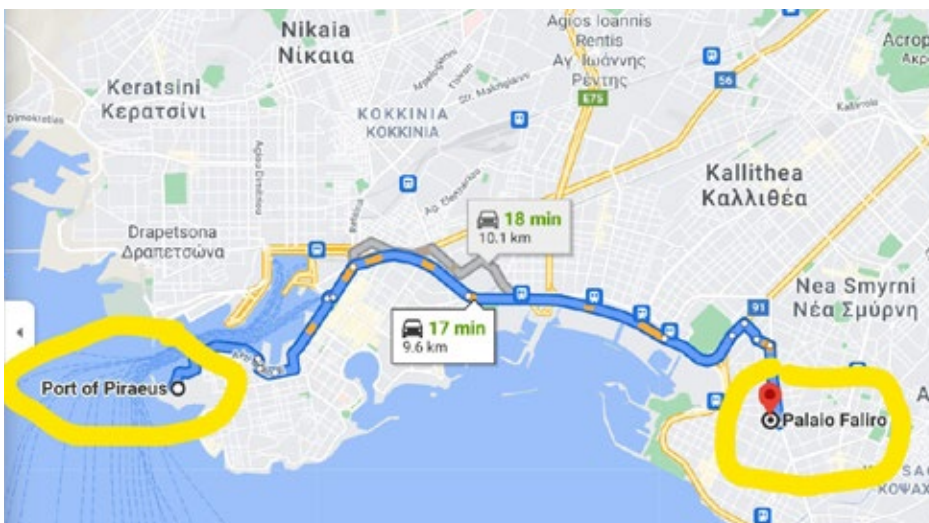
Helen.

After being unloaded from the boat, we were all put under arrest. The Greeks were completely disorganized, and they grabbed everyone that came from Germany as collaborators. There was a dingy, dirty office, dirty floors. We couldn't contact the relatives— Shura had no phone and we didn't know he lived in a hovel. We were being held in suspicion and stayed all night under some stairs with our wet luggage. The bathroom was a stinking mess and a guard watched you went you went.

In the morning we were loaded into the back of a truck. The truck came to a locked gate—a jail. Pop jumped out and ran ahead to see what was happening. When he came back, he was shaken. He gave our small packet of valuables to me and said our only chance was to find Shura. The truck started moving into the gates of the jail, and holding Olga, I jumped out. Baba Lyena stayed with Pop—she could barely walk. We moved into the crowds. When I looked back, I saw the gates close behind the truck.

I moved around the street, showing a paper with Shura's address, Picrodaphne Street. No one knew the address. I couldn't speak Greek and no one understood any other language. Someone suggested the subway. Sitting across from us in the subway compartment was a young woman eating a sandwich. Olga stared at her, watching her eat—we hadn't eaten in a long time. The woman looked at Olga, broke off half the sandwich and gave it to her. People were helpful, and told us where to get off. There was a storm raging and my fur coat looked like a wet cat in the pouring rain. Olga was wearing the heavy coat I made her from a German uniform. Her feet and head were soaked.

We got off at Lyofor Syngrou Street and walked to Nea Smyrni. By that time we were actually quite close, about 5-6 km from Shura's place, but no one knew the street. We went back to the station in the rain and took the double decker bus back around. It was open, like a jitney, and we travelled along the coast, by the sea. Waves were crashing and sometimes went over the bus. We got back to Palaio Faliro and got off. The road was clay. Olga couldn't walk anymore so I unbuttoned my coat and lifted her into it, holding the end up, one step at a time, lifting her on my leg. I had my bag on my other shoulder.



This map shows the Port of Piraeus (on the left), and Palaio Faliro on the right. In the general confusion and disorganization, Helen, Peter, Olga, and Baba Lyena were put under arrest on their arrival to Greece. Peter was taken away in a truck with Baba Lyena, and told Helen to take Olga and jump out before they got to the gates. She fled into the street, trying to find Picrodaphnes Street, in the Palaio Faliro area, where their relatives lived. Her harrowing journey is described in this narrative. Now an upscale resort area, at that time it was a remote area of peasant farmers and sheepherders, a couple miles from the end of the nearest bus line.



CHAPTER FIVE  
**Athens to America**



The family near their living quarters outside Athens, with Mt. Hymettus in the background. Pictured are: Peter, friends Anna Langada and her husband, Helen, Vasily Ivanovich, Steven and Olga. Baba Anya (Anna Grigorievna) is probably taking the photo. Olga later wrote: "From Shura's place we had an unimpeded view of Mt. Hymettus across the flat treeless expanse of the Attica Plain..."

A Greek peasant plowing the field with a horse, Mt Hymettus in the background.

## Important Events

**December 4, 1945**

Helen, Peter, Olga, and Baba Lyena arrive at the Port of Piraeus in Athens.

**June 6, 1946**

Steven Stilianos Stavrakis is born.

**October 20, 1946**

Shura (Alexander, Peter's cousin) and his wife Milya leave for the US. The communist offensive intensifies.

**April 7, 1947**

Anna and Vasily, Helen's parents, arrive in Greece.

**November 24, 1947**

Baba Lyena, Helen's grandmother, dies.

**April 7, 1950**

Helen, Peter, Olga and Steven board the TSS Nea Hellas for Hoboken, New Jersey. They arrive in the United States on April 22, 1950.

# The Greek Civil War

Helen and Peter arrived in Greece during the final phase of the Greek Civil War, which spanned approximately 1946–1949. It was a brutal conflict between the Greek Government army (supported by the US and UK) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), which was supported by Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, and the USSR (in a covert manner, by proxy). It is considered one of the first conflicts of the Cold War era.



A guerilla of the Democratic Party (communist) surrenders, 1948. Bert Hardy/Getty Images. AvaxNews.com

Much of the war was guerilla warfare. Armed bands entered Greece through the mountainous regions of the Yugoslav and Albanian borders. Guerillas roamed the countryside at night and ambushes were common. Helen described it as martial law. From 1940–1949, over 10% of the Greek population died as a result of famine, terror, or war—over 700,000 people.





British paratroopers in Athens during the Greek Civil War, 1944-1949. Nationalww2museum.org.



Greek Civil War Communist Propaganda poster.



Greek Civil War monarchist propaganda poster. 1946. www. booksjournal.gr.



End of the Civil War. Titled "The holocaust and the consequences. Greece, after the Civil War: ruins, refugees, the homeless..." From a supplement to a Greek newspaper. "A War Which didn't have to happen."





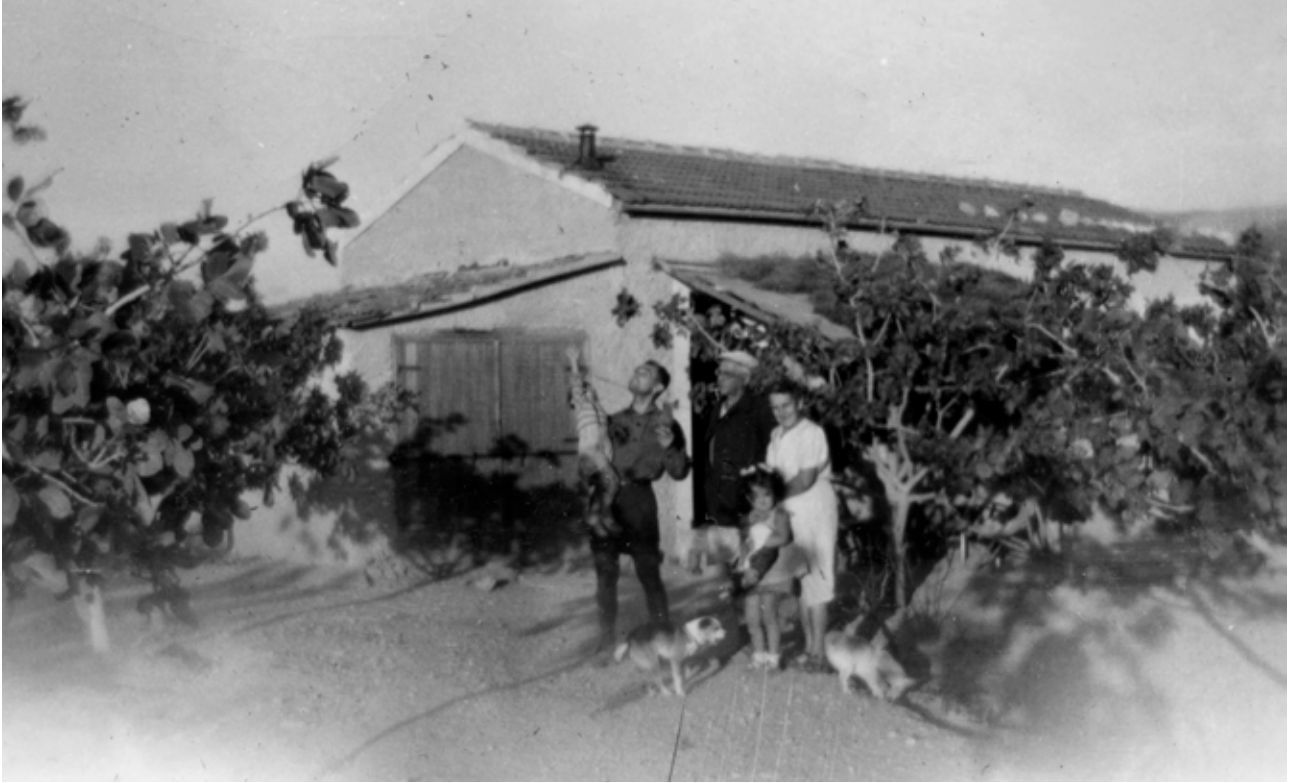
It was a long property with rooms made to face the shade, fenced-in barbed wire and with pistachio trees in rows. Several stone steps led down to a river (revma) that existed only in the rainy season, when downpours washed down from the mountains, and it was white with foam. Eight months of the year, it was a dry riverbed full of polished stones. From the river on, you could see mountains in the spring, covered with poppies, red and yellow. And on the other side of the river, shepherds. They had a piece of cloth wrapped around their waist and another pulled through the legs to make something like pants. They wore a cloak of rough wool and carried big sticks herding the sheep, just like in pictures.

The villagers made bricks from clay mixed with straw to build houses, then put them into molds and set them in the sun to bake. A mixture of lye was used as mortar between the bricks. But they had to make them waterproof, so they crushed marble or other stones, mixed in something like sand and covered every exposed part of the house with a thick whitish layer that shimmered in the sun. It was very beautiful, scratchy, and water repellent. This was how houses were built there since ancient times.

Olga, Steven and dog. This photo shows part of the house described by Helen, which was really more of a poor hut.



- 
- 
- The first room was crammed with Shura and Milya's furniture and silver.
- Shoved against one side were gorgeous cabinets full of silver and paintings
- and carved tables made of beautiful dark wood they had originally brought
- to Greece from Russia. There were paintings of the sort you'd see in the
- Tretyakov Gallery of Moscow hanging on the walls. They sold it all before
- they left Greece. Everything was dirty and dusty...nightmarish.
- 



In front of the house.



The stucco that Helen described is clearly visible in this photo.

At the other end of the house was a garage full of unopened stuff and bags of dirty sheets no one had washed.

In the beginning, Baba Lyena and Pop slept on the floor on spread out army blankets. Our beds were makeshift boards with a mattress. Shura and Milya also had a makeshift bed in their room. After Pop was drafted and stayed in the military hospital in Athens, I was alone for five months with a newborn, my grandmother, and Olga. By this time, my grandmother was ill and incontinent, and hardly able to walk. We were in no-man's land—a mile and a half from the last bus. It was completely dark at night.

Olga and I slept on the bed. She had a real pillow.

We made a bed for Baba Lyena outside on the dirt patio, but when it was cold, we brought it into the kitchen. There was no heat. In the bedroom, we had a little metal stove to use with either coal or wood, whatever you could get.

Each of the two bedrooms had a door opening onto the patio and a window. The patio was tamped down earth. They would throw thistles up onto the roof for shade and in the summer, when it got hot, we mostly stayed outside. In the winter, the rooms were cold. I did all the laundry by hand in a round tub with a wooden board, with cold water drawn from the well. In the winter, the water was so cold my hands got numb and hurt. The sheets were especially difficult to wash and wring out.

My children were always clean.

Helen and children in front of the well.





The well is shown to the right of Helen. Photo: Helen, Steven, Olga, and cat. Helen described drawing cold water from the well for washing laundry by hand in "a round tub with a wooden board."

Steven at the well

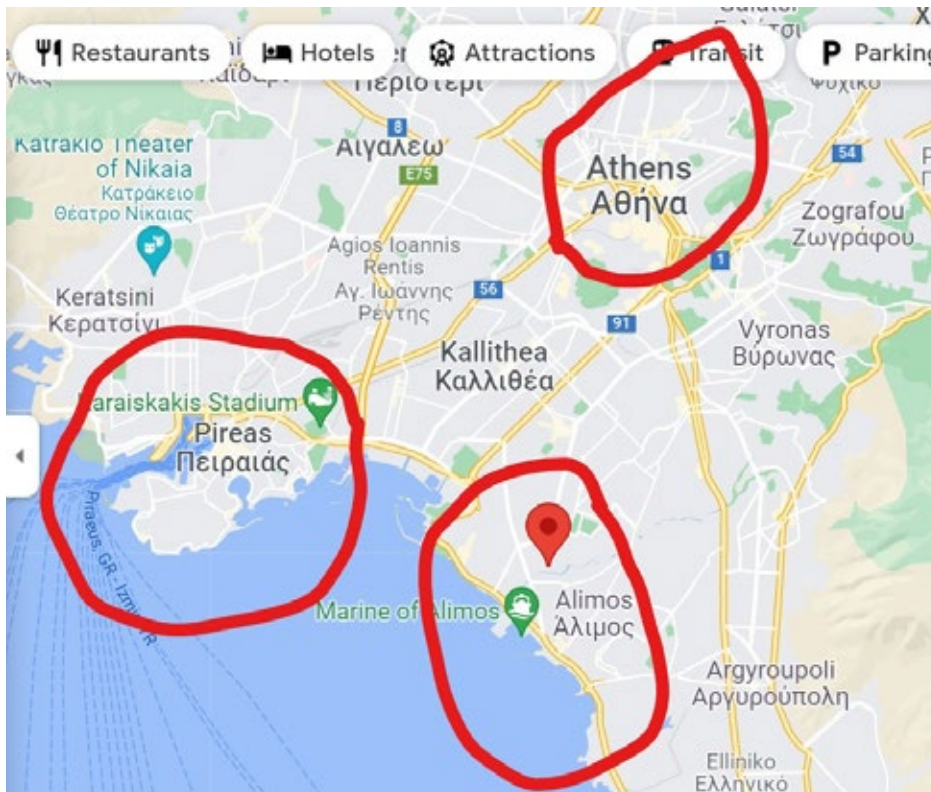


Helen was proud that despite the poor circumstances, her children were always clean and well-dressed. She and Baba Anya sewed clothes for them from any scraps they could find, and they always were neat and well cared for.

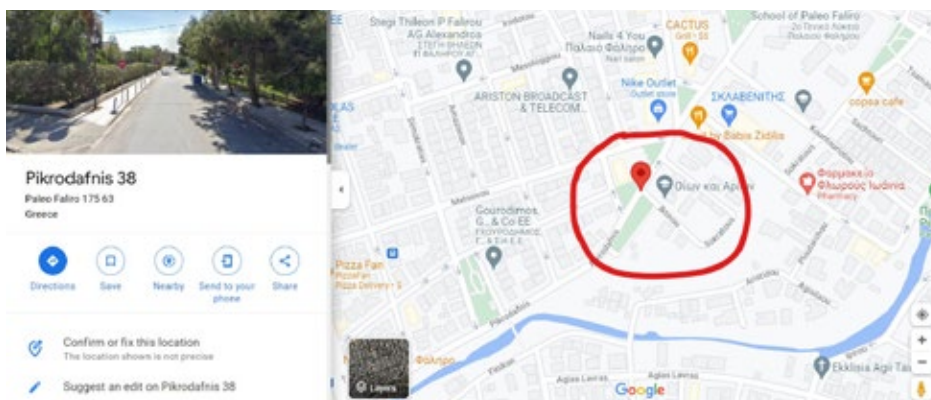




When they got to Picrodaphnis, Shura raised the question of payment for rent. This was the first mention of money. They had assumed the arrangement was that Peter would maintain the place and plant trees in return for living in the ramshackle rooms. They had little of value: nine gold coins, a gold cigarette case, and several crosses on chains. Besides that, there were a couple cases of food—canned meat and powdered milk. The gold coins were actually quite valuable and they had used a few along the way to change to local currency and buy train tickets, among other things. They had been a lifesaver. Shura agreed to charge one gold coin per month for rent and appropriated the nine that were left. This was a gross overpayment, but Helen and Peter were worn out and felt they had no choice, so they agreed.



This map shows a red marker where the family lived, (lower right) outside of Athens in what was then a remote and rural area a couple of kilometers from the nearest bus line. To the upper left is Piraeus, the port where they landed in Greece and to the north is Athens.



This is a close-up of the spot where they lived. The red marker shows where the ktima (land parcel) was located. The Ilisos River, to the south on the map, has been re-channeled since the time the family lived there. It used to be directly behind the ktima and now it is some distance away. The region, called Palaio Faliro, was poor and remote, and is now a high-end resort.

Then there was another another shock for Helen and Peter—it turned out Shura had decided to get as far away from Europe as possible—to America--and had already booked passage for his family when they arrived but hadn't mentioned this in his earlier letters. He wanted Peter to take over the place once he left and plant trees, so that they could keep their land. Peter did plant pistachio and olive trees between the times he worked in the military.

As it happened, Shura and Milya left nine months later for the US, exactly when the coins ran out.

Helen.

•  
• Later, after Shura's family left, on October 20, 1946, we took over the front  
• room. When Stevie was born, we got Irene's crib (Irene was the daughter  
• of Milya and Shura). We cleaned out the garage for Lyena, but still brought  
• her bed into the kitchen on cold nights. Anna and Vasily arrived after Steve  
• was born, April 7, 1947. I'm trying to remember how they came. I know they  
• were walking from a bus somewhere. They stayed in the second room. Baba  
• Lyena was still alive then. Sometimes we got oatmeal or canned milk from  
• Shura's brother in Canada. I'd go to the fields and get huge sacks of grass to  
• feed the rabbits. They lived in tunnels under the ground.  
•

Olga on Picrodaphnis.

•  
• To describe it as primitive is already giving it greater status than it  
• deserves...Shura's ktima was set in a barren dry plain in the middle of a few  
• scattered sheep farms about three quarters of a mile inland from the sea. It  
• was on the fringes of a fishing and agricultural village called Palaio Faliro  
• (Ancient Phaleron), a couple of miles from the last bus stop. During our  
• time, a rickety barbed wire fence ran along the stretch of dirt road. It was  
• traversed by a large wooden gate made of salvaged wood scraps with bits of  
• peeling color in various stages of disintegration. It opened onto a dirt track  
• that led down to our small house and continued past to a garage Shura had  
• built to house his motorcycle. There was a hodge podge of ramshackle out-  
• buildings, including a fenced in rabbit yard criss-crossed with tunnels and  
• surrounded by hutches, a chicken coop, and dovecote, ending at a goat pen.  
• From there, a footpath continued to the river, the Ilisos, which was actually  
• nothing more than a creek. The Ilisos is mentioned by Plato in the dialogue  
• Critias and in his time it ran along the ancient Athenian city wall, constitut-  
• ing a city boundary.  
•

•  
• On the northwestern side of the property, an empty field extended as far as  
• I could see. In April it undulated with brilliant red poppies, which Steve and  
• I collected and wove into rings, and used to prepare imaginary food, pre-  
• tending they were the toys we had never seen. From Shura's place we had  
•

•  
•  
• an unimpeded view of Mt. Hymettus across the flat treeless expanse of the  
• Attica Plain. There was also the sweet smell of violets which we picked and  
• brought indoors. Violets were important locally and all weddings included  
• the aromatic purple flowers coated in crystals of sugar... the doors all opened  
• out onto a dusty patio shaded with roses and grape vines in the summer  
• months.  
•

Helen also remembered the scent of Greek flowers:

•  
• The flowers in Greece grow beautiful. They smell so good you could never  
• believe it's the same violets or Lily of the Valley. Some were beautiful and  
• pink. They smelled like vanilla.  
•



A field of red poppies. Olga described: "In April the field undulated with brilliant red poppies, which Steve and I collected and wove into rings..."

Olga remembers—life at the ktima.

•  
• We had about 50 rabbits. When my father came home, he would catch a  
• rabbit, kill it, and hang it over the door of the garage on a wire, then skin it.  
• The rabbits were a major source of food.  
•  
• Occasionally, our mother would cook a hen. She and her mother butchered  
• it and then scalded it in a tin washtub to pluck the feathers. Scalding had to  
• be done just right or the feathers would be impossible to remove. When done  
• correctly, they came off easily and the pin feathers could be rubbed off.  
•

Our family had been city people and my grandfather had never involved himself in food preparation, which was women's work. In fact, the saying goes in Ukraine, most work is women's work. My mother and grandmother had to learn all these survival skills.

Behind the rabbit warren, separated by another barbed wire fence, we had a goat shed with at least two goats, a billy and a she goat. The billy stank of musk when the wind blew from the creek bed...

There was an outhouse. We used a big square can with a wire on it to carry it like a bucket, and another bucket on a stick. Pop and Shura would dip the smaller bucket and dump it into the big can, then carry it out someplace and empty it. We had a chamber pot under the bed for the children and for Baba Lyena. Bathing was done in the kitchen using a small basin of water.

Various photos show daily life at Picrodaphnis. The house is visible, as well as pistachio and olive trees, chickens, dogs and cats, and the dry landscape.



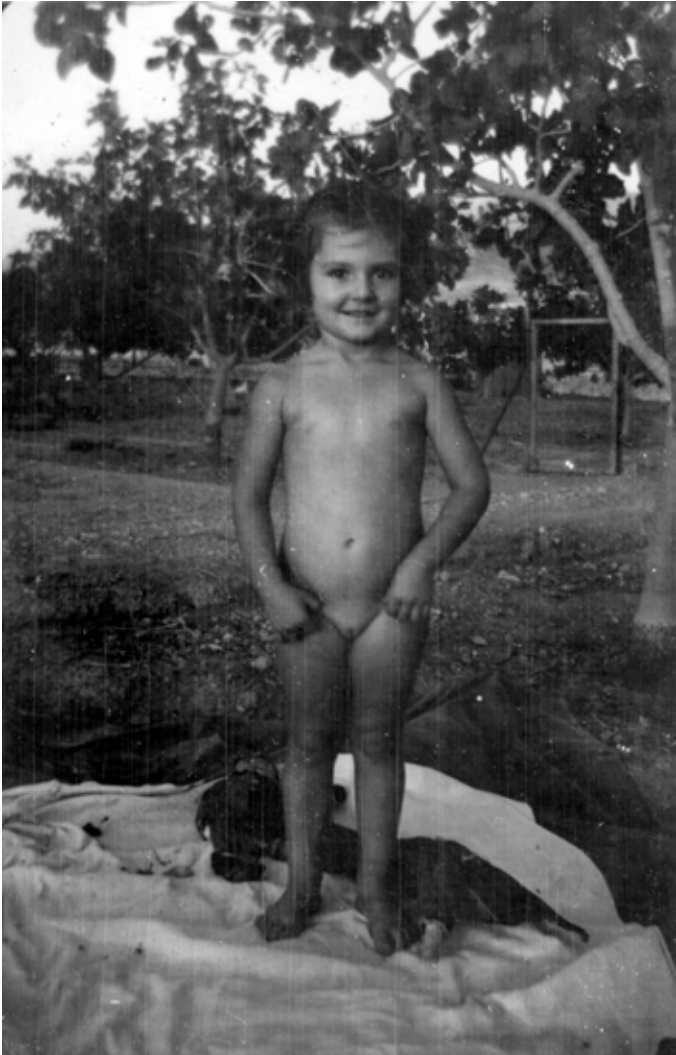


















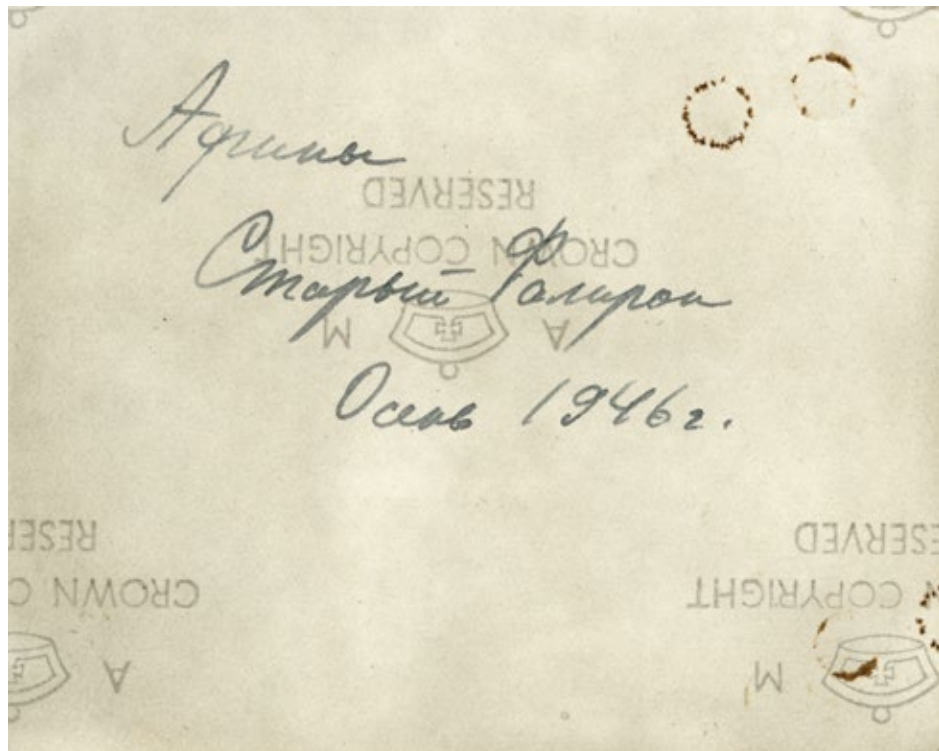


## Shura's family (Alexander, Peter's cousin)

Shura's family had been at the top of Athenian society. Before the war, they had a nice home in a neighborhood where refugees had lived for decades. His father Vladimir (Volodya), was a prominent physician. Shura was an engineer and had a good job at the airport. He and his wife Milya purchased a piece of dry, barren plain in the middle of a few scattered sheep farms about three quarters of a mile inland from the sea on the fringes of the fishing and agricultural village called Palaio Faliro (Ancient Phaleron). In Greek, it was called a "ktima" (parcel of land). The soil was poor and rocky and used mainly for sheep, but he dreamed of becoming wealthy, growing pistachios and olives. (The area did, in fact become the affluent suburb of Athens which it is now, but many years later).

The Civil War changed everything. Shura quit his job at the airport, fearing it would be bombed and destroyed, packed up as many valuables as he could, and left Athens in a hurry, thinking it was safest to stay away from the city. The area around Picrodaphnis was remote and barren at the time, and they lived what we would call today a "survivalist" lifestyle.

More photos of daily life at Picrodaphnes. Some photos include neighborhood children and other friends.































Helen on living in the Greek countryside.

• Shura built a chicken coop and had rabbits, pigeons, and chickens, but no  
• straw. They had brought Deda Volodya's books with them from Athens;  
• Russian classics, medical books, priceless editions. They tore pages out of  
• them to line the chicken coop.  
•  
• It was cold, dingy, and dirty and Olga got sick all the time. The heat and  
• the primitive living made everyone on edge. We were at a dead end. In the  
• morning I heard artillery all around. When I fed the children, there was  
• shooting. After Shura and Milya left, the communist offensive started and  
• there was guerrilla warfare all around us. (Approximately September/  
• October of 1946). Pop was drafted.  
•

Helen's Story of Christina and the neighbors.

• I had the impression I was dipped in a world hundreds of years old and with  
• the class structure of a primitive feudal society. It was especially difficult  
• because I came from the Soviet Union that survived revolution and had lots  
• of new ideas... we were raised on that. Here, after that, I come to a no-man's-  
• land, in proximity of Athens.  
•  
• Old Manginos, one of these shepherders, (provotas) lived several houses  
• down from Shura. He was a peasant with land wealth—there was one  
• house for Papa Manginos and three houses for his sons, actually just huts  
• like Shura's. Christos was the oldest son and wasn't too successful. To  
• make matters worse, Christos had only daughters. His wife, Christina, was  
• blamed. (Women in the Greek village were called by the name of their  
• husbands, so the wife of Christos became Christina.)  
•  
• One night they came to get me. Papa was away at the hospital. Christina  
• was pregnant and had started to bleed profusely. None of the surrounding  
• villages had a hospital. No help was available. I went to their house. It was  
• martial law and there were guerillas all around, so it was dangerous to walk  
• at night.  
•  
• Christina was lying in bed, pale and moaning. When she opened her legs,  
• big clots of blood came out. Only the women were present. They said, "Kyria  
• Eleni, what should we do?" They were compassionate but helpless. The  
• men's attitude was nonchalant—her husband wasn't even there.  
•  
• We put things under her to raise up her abdomen and put cold compress-  
• es on her stomach. Blood accumulates in the vagina and you think it's  
•



Απαγορεύεται η παράδοση τού παρόντος εις ειννόητους  
Αρχών, εκτός εάν πρόκειται περί αντικατάστασης αὐτοῦ.

ΔΠΟΡΡΗΤΟΝ  
ΕΚΤΥΠΩΣΙΣ 1948

A N° 072585  
(1) . . . 78<sup>th</sup> ΤΑΓΜΑ ΕΘΝΟΦΡΟΥΡΑΣ

## ΦΥΛΛΟΝ ΠΟΡΕΙΑΣ

Ὁ Ἐφεδρὸς:

Ἐπώνυμον . . . . . ΣΤΑΥΡΑΚΗΣ  
Ὄνομα . . . . . ΠΕΤΡΟΣ  
Ὀνομα πατρός . . . . . ΣΤΥΛΙΑΝΟΣ  
Κλάσιν Ἐπιστρατεύσεως . . . . . 1938  
Α. Σ. Μ. . . . . 5432  
Βαθμὸς . . . . . ὁπλαρχηγός  
Ὀπλὸν ἢ Σώμα . . . . . ὁπισθίου  
Εἰδικότης καὶ διαμέτρηση (2) . . . . . 7<sup>th</sup> τάξος  
Ἐπάγγελμα . . . . . 1<sup>st</sup> τάξος  
Τελιόφοτος . . . . . καί (3) . . . . . Πανσεπιδιμήτριον  
Ξέναι γλῶσσαι (4) . . . . . Ρωσικῶν-Γερμανικῶν-Γαλλικῶν-Ἀγγλικῶν  
Λοιπὴ γλῶσση . . . . . Ἑβραϊκῶν

Εἶναι ἑγγεγραμμένος εἰς τὰ μητρώα ἀρτένων:

Τοῦ Δήμου ἢ τῆς Κοινότητος . . . . . - Ἀθηνῶν  
τῆς Ἐπαρχίας . . . . . - Ἀττικῆς  
Τοῦ Νομοῦ . . . . . - Ἀττικῆς  
Ἰσχύος γεννήσεως . . . . . 1917  
Ἀριθμὸν Στρατολογικῶν Γραφείων . . . . . 100



Διαμένει εἰς

Χωρίον ἢ Πόλιν (καὶ Διεσθῆνας) ἢ ἄλλο καὶ ἀριθμὸς . . . . . Ἀθῆνας  
τῆς Ἐπαρχίας . . . . . - Ἀττικῆς  
Τοῦ Νομοῦ . . . . . - Ἀττικῆς

Ἐν Ἐπιστρατεύσει ὀφείλει νὰ παρουσιασθῇ  
εἰς (6) . . . . .

Ἐν ΒΕΤ. 902 τῆ 30<sup>th</sup> Ὀκτωβρ. 1949

Ὁ χορηγῶν τὸ φύλλον πορείας:

Τὸ τμήμα τοῦτο δίδεται εἰς τὸν Ἐφεδρὸν.  
Προσοχὴ εἰς τὰς ὁμοιωθεὶς ὁδηγίας.

Peter was drafted into the Greek army, due to his Greek background and the need for physicians. These pages show his official military documents, with translation.

Official paper with military information: This is a paper with the information of the soldier in the case of mobilization.

Private

Issued on 1948

Number: 072585

78th order of national guard

Information of the soldier:

Last Name: Stavrakis

Name: Petros

Father: Stylianos

Class of enrollment: 1938

Number of military division: 5432

Rank: Soldier

Branch: Army

Specialization: doctor

Profession: doctor

Education: University

Foreign languages: Russian, German, French, English

Behavior: Excellent

**Registered in the military record of:**

The municipality of Athens

Province of Attiki

Region of Attiki

Year of birth: 1917

Military office: 100

**Lives in:**

City and address: Athens, Paleo Faliro,

Pikrodafnis 38

Province of Attiki

Region of Attiki

In case of mobilization he must be presented:

At (this area is blank)

At BIT 902, on the 30th of October 1949

Stamp of the National Guard

Photo of Petros

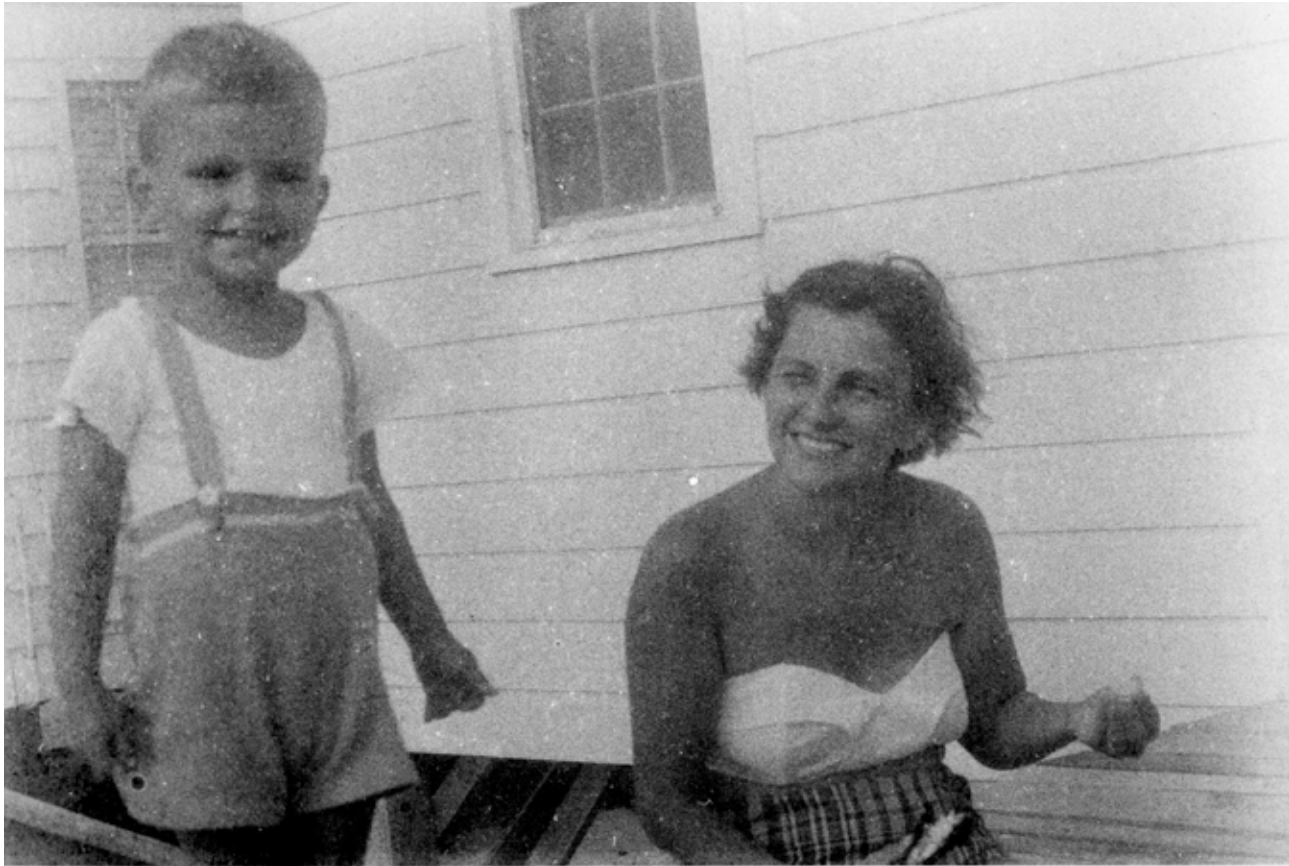
On the right bottom it says: Pay attention to the directions at the back of the paper (the back is not in the folder)

Peter with his Greek army unit.





Helen and Peter on an Athens street, Peter in his military uniform.



Photos of Steven Stilianos Stavrakis.  
Born in Athens, January 6, 1946.  
Died in Elkton, Maryland, March 5, 1974.  
He was much loved.





Helen on Steven's birth.

- Steve was born six months after we arrived in Greece. Pop was living in
- Athens at the time and somehow I got to the hospital. I remember there was
- one big room with curtains between beds, which didn't close all the way.
- The pain went on for 24 hours, and I had no drugs. I was lying down. A
- nurse came and started to push the baby out physically—he would not come
- out. She jumped on my stomach.
- 
- There were no doctors around, but finally she grabbed one in the hall. The
- doctor pulled the baby out, but my uterus tore. Pop arrived an hour later. We
- named the baby Stilian after his Greek grandfather.
- 

Helen didn't get pregnant again for another six years, which she attributed to the physical trauma of Steven's birth.



Official Greek arrival documents for Anna and Vasily (Helen's parents). They arrived from the refugee camp in Italy on April 7, 1947. By that time, Shura and Milya had left for the US.

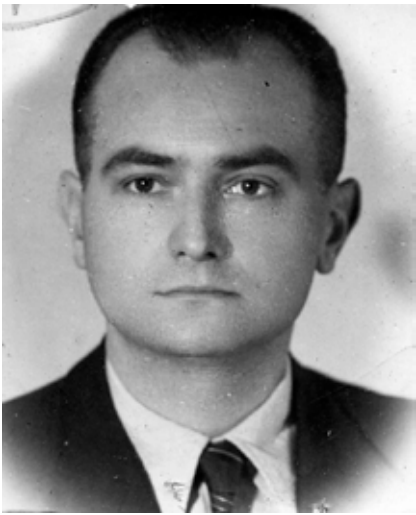
After Anna and Vasily came, they helped with the household chores and Helen started looking for a job. She found one in a lab in Kallithea, with the help of Greek relatives and using her chemistry degree. By then, Helen was supporting five people and the pay barely covered food. She often walked the 2.7 miles (one way) to and from work to save on bus fare. She and a couple of other women she worked with lent each other money to tide them over.

Helen at work in the lab in Kallithea, a part of Athens. Once Anna and Vasily came, Helen had help with the household chores, and she got a job. Her training in aniline dyes was useful, as the Germans had left behind barrels of dyes and she could speak German.















## Olga's story. Friends and a Camera.

My mother had met some Russian emigres with children and organized trips to the beach during the hot months. Sometimes we managed to get into Athens, which was quite bewildering with its buses, shouting, vendors, shops, and cars—things we never saw in Palaio Faliro... Through the emigres, she met Anna Nikonorovna Langada, who became a regular visitor to our house and joined us for excursions to the Acropolis when it was safe to explore. She also lent my mother the camera with which she took all the pictures included in these chapters. My mother managed to scrape together money for film, but processed the pictures only years later when we got to Delaware and my father was already an intern in Wilmington General Hospital.

When the shooting moved away from our area and into the northern mountains, my mother organized a trip to the Acropolis. She was always interested in museums, natural wonders, and archaeological sites, and in spite of our difficult life, she made sure we experienced this most famous of all ancient ruins of the West. We went at least once, but perhaps twice.

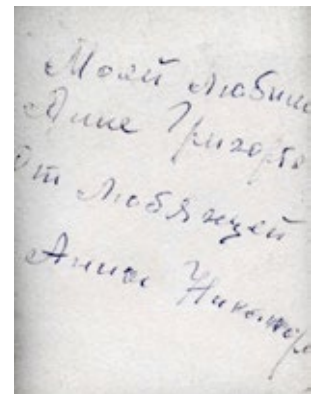
We climbed up the side of the hill among the small pines. There was no one else there. We were alone with the wind and the echoes of the past. My mother took a picture of me sitting on one of the big stones in front of the Parthenon. We explored each of the buildings, walking through them, exploring all the different stones strewn about just as they were left after the great explosion of 1686.

My parents loved exploring and we climbed the hills around, wandered through all the buildings, looking at the columns as they discussed the mathematical values of the proportions and the spectacular view of the city from the top.

We descended again along the least steep side through the small pines, stopping to take a few pictures along the way with Anna Nikonorovna's little camera. I was too young to appreciate the full glory of classical Greece but the sheer silence of the place of carved stone and columns imprinted itself in my mind and in the end, I did become an archaeologist, albeit not in this region.



Helen met some Russian emigres with children and organized trips and outings. Through the emigres, she met Anna Nikonorovna Langada, who became a regular visitor to their home and joined them for excursions when it was safe to explore. She lent Helen the camera with which all the pictures included in this chapter were taken. Helen scraped together money for film, but was able to get it processed only when they were already in Delaware.





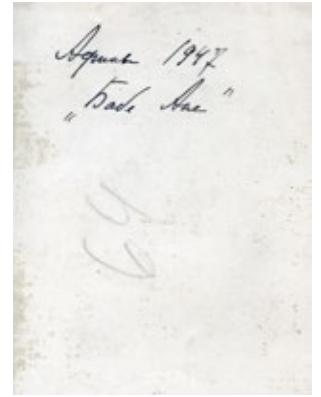




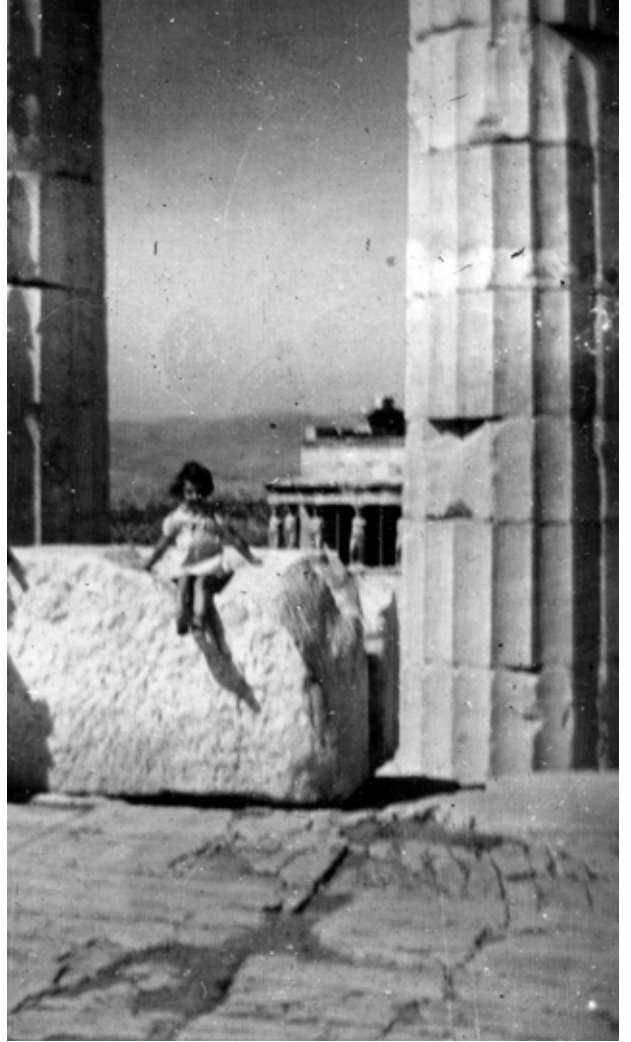
Вороши и Любилыи  
Друзьям нашим  
Аины Григорьеве и Василии  
Ивановиче!  
От Аины - Милана  
и Зои Лонгаде  
28/V 1954г. Венеция



Helen and Peter loved to explore, and whenever it was safe, they went for excursions. In these photos, they are at the Acropolis in Athens, with Olga, Steven, Baba Anya, and Anna NIKONOROVNA (a Russian émigré friend they were close to, who lent them the camera used to take these photos.)







Out and about, in and around Athens, when safety permitted.













When it was possible to do so, Helen organized trips to the beach at Piraeus in hot weather, along with other emigres and local children.









## Narrow escapes

Mitropoleos Square at Easter. Helen stopped by here when she was on her way to work saw the square draped in black. It was a funeral procession for the captain of a platoon that Peter was meant to have joined. In the guerilla warfare of the time, the whole platoon was wiped out in an ambush. She called it "heartbreaking."



Helen.

• The communists were encircling Athens. They were beaten back. They  
• wanted to send Pop to fight in the Northern mountains (near the border  
• with Albania, where the most brutal guerrilla warfare was taking place). We  
• were trying to get him left in Athens with the King's Guard. It wasn't regular  
• fighting, it was guerilla fighting...people shooting from trees, scattered  
• around the countryside, ambushes. I went to see the captain's wife and  
• begged her to talk to her husband so Pop wouldn't have to leave with this  
• unit from Athens. I remember she had a poor apartment. Sure enough, she  
• did it, and Pop stayed where he was. Shortly after, I was rushing to work in  
• the center of Athens and I realized I was late, so I started running through  
• the Metropolis, the square for the big central cathedral of Athens, the Met-  
• ropolitan Cathedral. I saw it was all draped in black and I asked people. It  
• was a funeral for that same officer, the captain. Мой капитан. (My captain).  
• The whole platoon had been killed in an ambush—exterminated. Then I saw  
• the procession, and behind the casket went his wife and family, the women  
• dressed in black veils. It was the same woman I had spoken with in her  
• poor apartment not long ago. Heartbreaking.

• And there was another incident. I had trouble to keep that man alive! Again,  
• they wanted to send Pop to the front. I heard from a priest we knew that a  
• Russian lady, Grand Duchess Yelena Vladimirovna, a first cousin of Nicholas  
• II, lived in Athens and helped Russian refugees. She had been married to a



The Russian Orthodox Church where Helen came to ask Grand Duchess Yelena Vladimirovna to spare Peter from going to the front. The Grand Duchess was exiting services and said she was going to have tea with General Papagos, the Supreme Commander of the Greek forces. She agreed to talk to him about Peter. Peter ended up staying in the military in Athens.



• Prince of Greece and Denmark. The priest knew her  
• lady-in-waiting, Knigina Demidova, and arranged  
• for me to have an audience with her. I came there  
• and explained everything. She was very nice  
• and said that the Grand Duchess used to grant  
• audiences with Russians asking for help (prasiteli)  
• but she stopped recently because political demon-  
• strators came and shouted at her. But Demidova  
• said she would talk to her. The Grand Duchess had  
• her own pew in the Russian Church and I was to  
• come to the church courtyard on Sunday.



Alexandros Papagos, the Supreme Commander of the Greek Army.

•  
• Well sure enough, me raised in communist Russia, all full of liberal ideas,  
• beaten down to a pulp by this time...the Russians said, Do you know how  
• to curtsy? I only knew the one curtsy from ballet classes, and it was the  
• wrong one! They said, well just curtsy any way you can. On Sunday I was  
• there, waiting in the courtyard of the church. When the service was over the  
• back door opened and there was a walkway where only she walked, in the  
• middle of other people. She stopped and I came up. I don't remember what I  
• said and well, she gave me her hand and I kissed it. It was a dry little hand.  
• She was an old woman. She was very nice and I just spilled out whatever  
• happened to us as fast as I could. She listened and listened and listened.  
• And then at the end...she listened for a long time. I didn't bother anymore  
• about how I was standing. I just told her. It was really a matter of life and  
• death.

•  
• She said, in Russian, "What do you want?" I said, "I want my husband to  
• stay here because at least he's here with us. How can I survive with two  
• children, taking care of my parents and grandmother, living out who knows  
• where, no support. The army doesn't pay and if they take him out..." She said,  
• "Well, usually I have tea on Thursday and General Papagos (the military  
• Commander in Chief of Greece) is going to be at that tea. Do you suppose if I  
• talk to him and tell him to look into it that would help?"

•  
• Would it help! These people are so naïve! I said, "If that doesn't help, nothing  
• will!" I wanted to hug her. She was really so nice. She had a face like an  
• icon. These big eyes, slim face, thin nose. Well, icon! She dressed in black.  
• Widows in Greece dressed in black in those days.

•  
• Before this, Pop was trying to crawl on his belly to get into this military  
• building and see one of the officers, and he was shown the door. Thursday  
• passed and Pop goes back to the office in uniform. They say, "Who is Dr.  
• Stavrakis?". All the doors were opened right away. He went right into the  
• inner sanctum and spoke with an adjutant of Papagos. They said, "What can  
• we do for you?"

•  
• Peter was allowed to stay in Athens.

•  
• One more narrow escape, as told by Peter.

•  
• I imagine it was 1945 or 46. When we arrived there was a guerilla war, civil  
• war in full bloom. Even though I was not the youngest person at that time  
• I was drafted into the National Guard. We were all taken to the big camp  
• near Athens and the camp was encircled with a wire fence so people could  
• not go around it, and one after another people were taken to the office and



These are screenshots from a video in which Peter and Helen are explaining a newspaper clipping. The article shows Grand Duchess Yelena Vladimirovna on the left (the first cousin of Nicholas II) and probably her daughters, as closely as we could identify them. Her daughters were Princess Marina, Princess Olga, and Princess Elizabeth. The Grand Duchess helped Helen by discussing Peter's military assignment with General Papagos, which enabled Peter to stay in Athens and avoid heading north into the guerilla warfare and the inevitable ambushes.



• given their assignment. At the door there was a sentry so you couldn't leave.  
 • It was for a small group of people who would be sent immediately to the  
 • action with guerillas. The rest of the soldiers were in the main barracks. I  
 • had a bad feeling if I was sent this time it might be disaster for me. I don't  
 • know if it was ESP or what. I asked my friend to go forward to the sentry  
 • and give him as many questions as he could to distract his attention. He  
 • did and during the conversation I slipped behind the back of the sentry and  
 • out of the fence and back into the main barracks. This was not noticed and  
 • someone else was picked in my place and was assigned to a battalion of  
 • the National Guard. It is sad to say, and I'm sorry, but they went to action  
 • near Athens and were ambushed by guerillas. Eight of them were killed  
 • including my friend the physician. Of course this was something we

•  
• couldn't control. I didn't want to be mean to somebody. I only wanted to save  
• myself and my family. This is what happened. Later I was assigned to a  
• place which was much safer.  
•

Peter—Our life in Greece—rabies.

•  
• We had several dogs and a cat and of course it's very hot in summer and  
• no rain. One day in early May, Shura showed me the sky, which had no  
• clouds and the sun was already up. From now on, he said, until the first of  
• September you will see no clouds and no rain. After that, in winter, there  
• is plenty of rain but summer...The temperature almost every day is 40  
• degrees C. That type of climate is suitable to the spread of rabies. There was  
• no treatment or prevention. Control of the disease in animals didn't exist.  
• Almost every year animals got it. Our black dog, a very friendly dog, got sick  
• and died in a few hours. I went out behind the house in an isolated area near  
• the river and threw the dog's body there. Pretty sad.  
•

•  
• On the way home, I thought maybe the dog had rabies so I returned back,  
• probably not much later, and brought a razor or knife and separated the head  
• from the body. I placed the head in a bag and wrapped it in paper and took a  
• bus to the animal hospital in Athens. It took about 20 minutes. By that time  
• it was about one o'clock in the afternoon and from 1-4 everything is closed.  
• It's too hot. So when I came to the vet I saw there was not much activity and  
• some fellow, a janitor, came up. He probably had worked there many years.  
• He didn't mind me coming. I explained that I had the head of a dog to be  
• examined for rabies.  
•

•  
• Oh, he said, there couldn't be anything simpler than that. We went through  
• to the lab. He picked up the head with extreme skill—you have to under-  
• stand that he was uneducated and I don't even know if he could read or  
• write. He opened the skull, removed a small particle of brain, made some  
• slides, quickly put it under the microscope, then moved away and asked  
• if I could see it. To my dismay I could see little tiny bodies of rabies in the  
• cells (Negri bodies). The dog had rabies. I returned home and we hadn't  
• yet done anything but the second dog was a little tiny one and he got sick.  
• There were no typical symptoms, especially since people used to call rabies  
• madness and say the dog would get mad at you—that dog never got mad—  
• still friendly, obeying, but rapidly developed paralysis of legs so we knew  
• what it was.  
•

•  
• Measures are to immunize people around the dogs. Of course, these dogs  
• didn't bite me but I was attending to them so I decided to have the shots. I  
• did receive them and that was a mess because at that time the shots were  
•

given every day for three weeks subcutaneously in the belly and the sides. The shots made me quite ill and for three weeks I felt not too happy about it.

The second measure is, the other animals in the household should be destroyed. During the illness they were chased by the sick dogs. For a dog it is inevitable to get it, but for a cat somewhat less. Rabies can attack any warm-blooded animal. Horse, sheep, cow, human. So we came to the grim task of destroying the animals. I had to take the dog a couple miles away to the military outpost there and ask the soldier to shoot the dog, which he did for me. I put the cat in a bag and I had to walk about a mile or two to a deep well. I tied a big rock to the bag and dropped it into the well and went home. And then I saw a thing which I will never forget in my life. On the window of the bedroom the cat was sitting and carefully licking off his wet fur. I don't understand how he got out of the well and never tried to find out. The one thing I decided was that he should be left alone. The cat never got rabies. He survived. And so did we.

## Baba Lyena's death

Baba Lyena continued to decline, becoming very ill and passing blood in her urine. She died on November 26, 1947, in the kitchen room where she slept when the weather was cold. Her daughter Anna was at her side.

Olga.

When my great grandmother was already very ill, I observed as my parents frantically fought to keep her alive... I remember them in the bedroom—a dark white-washed plain room. She was lying on a narrow bed against the back wall. My parents had their back to me turning her over in unison. Normally, they did not let me see what went on but I peeked through a crack in the door.

Yelena Ivanovna (Mihailenko) Britchkina. Baba Lyena, Helen's beloved grandmother (Anna's mother) died at home in Picrodaphnis on November 24, 1947. She had been declining for a long time and there was no way to get her an adequate diagnosis or treatment. Helen took care of her until the end of Baba Lyena's life. She was the person most dear to Helen as she grew up. Helen always said that "If you have only one person in your life who loves you unconditionally, that is all you need." Baba Lyena was that person for her, and she never forgot that.

This photo shows Baba Lyena's kind and gentle eyes, as Helen described her, with a remarkable lack of bitterness or sorrow, considering her difficult life.



Helen.

Baba Lyena died right there on this place—the kitchen. That’s where her bed was made. Baba Anya was with her. Pop examined her and did not find any abnormalities or tumors. It was normal as far as he could tell in those conditions. But apparently something was wrong with her urinary tract or kidneys. Who knows? Under those circumstances that’s how things were. If you lived, you lived. If not, there’s no help.

She grew weaker and weaker. Pop was not there. He was working at the hospital day and night. And...I distinctly remember...that when Baba Lyena died that was during the day about 4 o’clock. Baba Anya sent my father to a place with a public phone to call me at work.

Baba Lyena was first laid out in the cemetery behind the house (Palaio Faliro Municipal Cemetery, actually several blocks away) and then her bones were transferred to a Russian cemetery someplace. That’s how they do it. They wash the bones after 3 or 5 years and put them aside in a box. Friends, Kristoforovi (Galya), with whom I corresponded wrote exactly where it is. Baba Anya sent money from the US for the maintenance of the gravesite.

My mother (Anna) did not say anything. She was hurting. It was part of her life going away. Hers had not been a happy life and in some ways it was easier without Baba Lyena. Anna always had difficulty with her mother, partly created by her husband, Vasily Ivanovich. But her mother was part of her life and had been there for all of it and now she was gone. With her, that part of my mother’s past also ended.

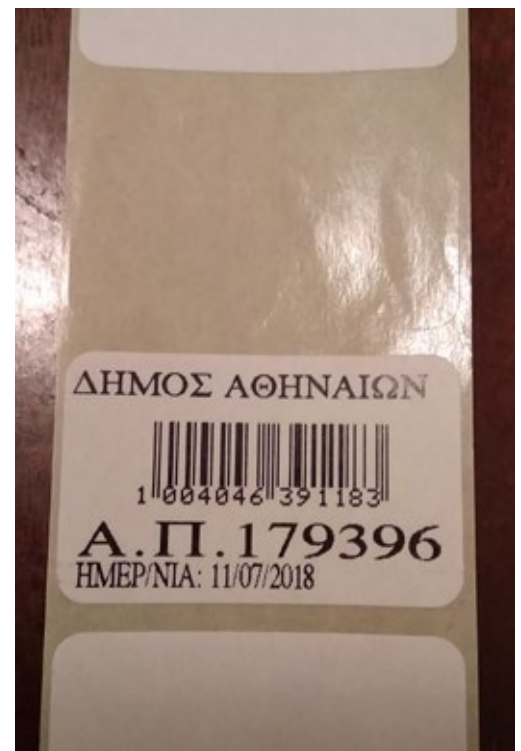
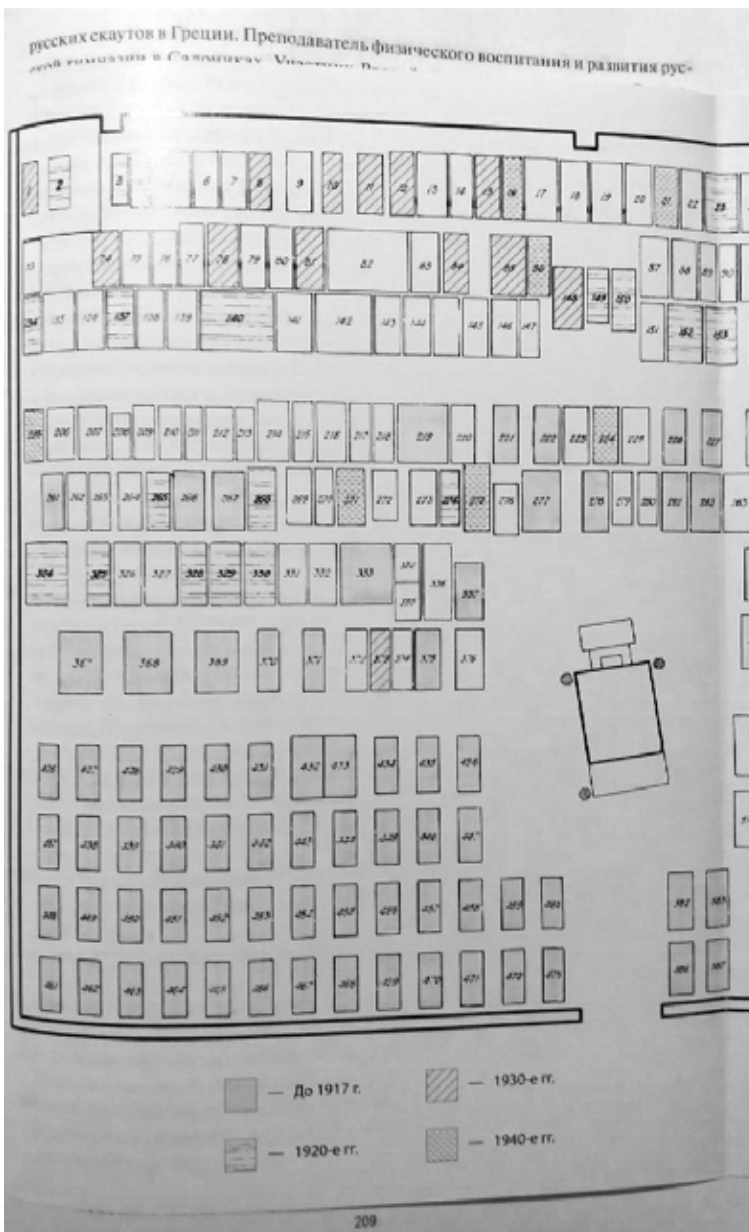
The priest came to the house and made a service. My father was a trained seminarian, so he knew all the chants and prayer. He sang passionately over my grandmother’s body. I was angry thinking, you jump up and make a performance when the person is not breathing! Give a little attention or decent behavior while the person can receive it!” He had never treated her well.

But she was someplace else already. He could not hurt her anymore. Everybody said how he sang with such soul! I think it occurred to him that he, too, was mortal and he was singing for himself. I thought maybe he was afraid not of his own mortality but of his immortality, because he had mistreated her. He did not believe in ghosts or religion, but I think his conscience gave him a few kicks. But that is the only time I remember he showed any kind of emotion.

So that’s how it was.

	Момъ
Булмакова Матрена	4
Буллова Иванъ Андреевичъ	11
Бортниковъ Софiя	21
Бурбидина Елена Ивановна	86 <sup>в</sup>
Бузинъ Константинъ	108
Бойко-Бойтевская Екатерина Венгелъ	122

Records from the cemetery for Baba Lyena.



## A Christmas memory—Olga's words

•  
• One day at Christmas time, two children came to the ktima to sing for food.  
• The girl was probably around 7 or 8 and her brother was about 6. She had  
• a triangle for an instrument, which she chimed with a metal prong that  
• produced only one note. My mother asked them their names and inquired  
• about their family. They had none. They were orphans.  
•

• She told them to go ahead and sing, which they did, standing very straight  
• on the leafless cold patio, their eyes focused out into the far distance seeing  
• nothing. My mother listened intently with her sad smile, also staring  
• somewhere I could not see. I knew that look, which I had named as her  
• remembering look, although she never talked about what she was remembering.  
• When they finished, she did not move, then abruptly turned, stepping  
• into the kitchen and emerged with a half a loaf of rye bread, which she  
• handed to the girl. The girl reached out for it and then paused, looking up at  
• my mother's face as if to confirm that she indeed had permission to take it.  
• For an instant, my mother stood like a marble statue, holding the bread in  
• her hand until the girl, unsmiling, took it gently from her hand and with a  
• whispered, "thank you" and she and her brother slowly turned toward the  
• gate.  
•

• I knew that my mother had given them all the bread we had in the house.  
•



## Leaving for America



Neighbors took Helen, Peter, Olga and Steven to the ship to depart Athens for the United States, April 7, 1950, on the ship Nea Hellas. Anna and Vasily joined them later in Wilmington, Delaware. They look upset in these photos, not knowing when they could be together again.



When they saw the poverty in Greece, the misery, and the continuing war, Helen and Peter realized they had no choice but to go further west to America. As Helen said, *For us, there was no going back.*

Helen.

- 
- We started to try and get out of Greece. Pop wrote to George (Yura), Shura's
- brother who was a physician in Canada, trying to get sponsorship to the U.S.
- You had to be sponsored to prove that you were not going to be a burden to
- the U.S. government.
- 

Peter's Story.

- 
- One day my cousin Shura gave me a letter to mail. The place we lived was a
- country place. It's not anymore. I had to walk a couple miles. The letter was
- to Yura, who was also preparing our papers to the US, to get sponsorship. We
- were working for several months to get signatures and letters of support,
- etc....When I picked up the letter and looked at his face there was something
- I didn't like in his expression. Hard to explain. I thought maybe I could read
- his mind. It made me think there's something in the letter of importance
- and would affect my future and the future of my family.
- 
- As soon as I left the yard and was out of sight of the house I came down to
- a tree and shade. It was very hot in summer. I opened the letter and read
- it. And to my surprise and dismay Shura had written a letter that would be
- extremely damaging to me. It stated that we are from Russia, that we are
- poorly educated, had communist ideas and his advice was to never let us in
- there or give us an affidavit to enter or assist us to leave Greece. The reason
- was probably that he wanted us to stay in Greece and take care of his garden
- and house. Or maybe it was something else. Whatever the reasons, if Yura
- had seen the letter we would never have gotten to the US and life would be
- different. I destroyed the letter, came back to Mom and told her about it and
- we never discussed it with anybody. This took place in 1948 or 49 and it will
- be soon 50 years past. Yura doesn't know about it.
- 

Yura (George) Stavradi, Shura's brother and Peter's cousin, was a physician in Ontario, Canada. He and his wife Madeleine helped Peter by contacting Dr. Wendell Hughes Jr., a prominent eye surgeon famous for his work in ophthalmic plastic surgery, who was originally from a small town in Canada where his father had been a country doctor. Dr. Hughes now lived on a huge estate on Long Island's Gold Coast. Yura and Madeleine helped the family get an affidavit of support from Hughes, which they had to renew three times, as Peter was in the Greek army.

November 8th, 1949, Athens

Dear Dr. Hughes:

I haste to inform you that a few days ago I was released from the Army. This gives me a chance now to realize my old dream to emigrate to the United States.

Excuse me ,please, for my troubling you again. I hope it will be the last time. Unfortunately, the second affidavit which you kindly sent in the name of Commsul General Steager an January 21, 1949, has never been received by the Consulate in Athens. As a result I am forced to disturb you once more.

Would you kindly send me new affidavit together with other relevant documents the description of which I quote below as they appear in the consular regulations:

- 1) Photostatic copy of the sponsor's latest federal income tax return, or copy certified by Collector of Internal Revenue where return was filed.
- 2) Statement from bank showing date deposit was opened, average balance and present sum.

The documents sent by you with the first affidavit, lost their time value by now. To avoid the chance of losing documents again, I would earnestly ask you to send them on to me on my home address instead of addressing them to the consulate.

I would like to reiterate that all expenses in connection with the preparation of new documents will be reimbursed to you by Dr. George W. Stavraky as heretofore.

My wife ,children and myself are in good health and we all earnestly and impatiently look forward to the early possibility of coming to the United States for the purpose of starting new life there. We are fully aware of the fact that, at least in the beginning we will have to do any kind of work there.

We sincerely hope that you will not refuse to send us all the above mentioned documents at your earliest convenience.

Thanking you in advance, I remain  
Respectfully Yours

Peter S. Stavrsky M.D.  
38 Picrodaphnis Street  
Old Feliron, Athens Greece.

A wealthy doctor in Long Island, Wendell Hughes, sent Peter an affidavit to enable him to come to Long Island and work as a laborer on his estate. However, he did not agree to be responsible for the family if they became indigent. Nina Malitsky, the daughter of Peter's mentor and dear friend in Kiev, the famous surgeon Jakov Pivovonski, agreed to take on that responsibility and signed a second affidavit, at great risk to herself and her husband Alexander. This is a copy of a letter Peter sent to Hughes from Greece. Peter knew no English and the letter has the stilted tone of an unofficial foreign translator, probably an acquaintance who had studied English.

December 6, 1949

Dr. Peter Stavraký  
38 Picrodaphnis Street  
Old Faliron  
Athens , Greece

Dear Dr. Stavraký:

I have completed the new papers, which are a duplicate of the old papers that had been sent previously with change of dates. I also got two letters from the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary, one from the Superintendent, Dr. Ruppe and one from Chief of one of the Ear Clinics, Dr. Hanley, who is a good friend of mine and who may be able to do something when you come, toward getting you some work in ear, nose and throat work. I understand your work is limited to ear, nose and throat and not eye work. We may be able to work out something for you at the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary.

It was a peculiar coincidence that the day after I received your last letter saying that the Consulate had not received the papers, that I received the entire envelope unopened with the papers enclosed that were sent to the Consulate in January 49. I tore off the front of the envelope and am enclosing it herein so that you may see the date when it was sent. It was January 31, 1949. I am sure the address seems quite definite but apparently they did not take the trouble to investigate at the Consulate. However I hope these papers arrive and that your difficulties with "red tape" will soon be over.

Let us know when you are arriving and we will look forward to seeing you and your family. I am also sponsoring another family of displaced persons which I expect will arrive in another month or so. Anything we can do to help you we will be only too glad to do. We may be able to meet you at the boat if we know when you are arriving and take you out to our house. Our youngsters are looking forward to seeing yours.

With kindest regards , I remain

Yours very sincerely,

Wendell L. Hughes, M.D., F.A.C.S.

Best wishes for  
a Merry Christmas.

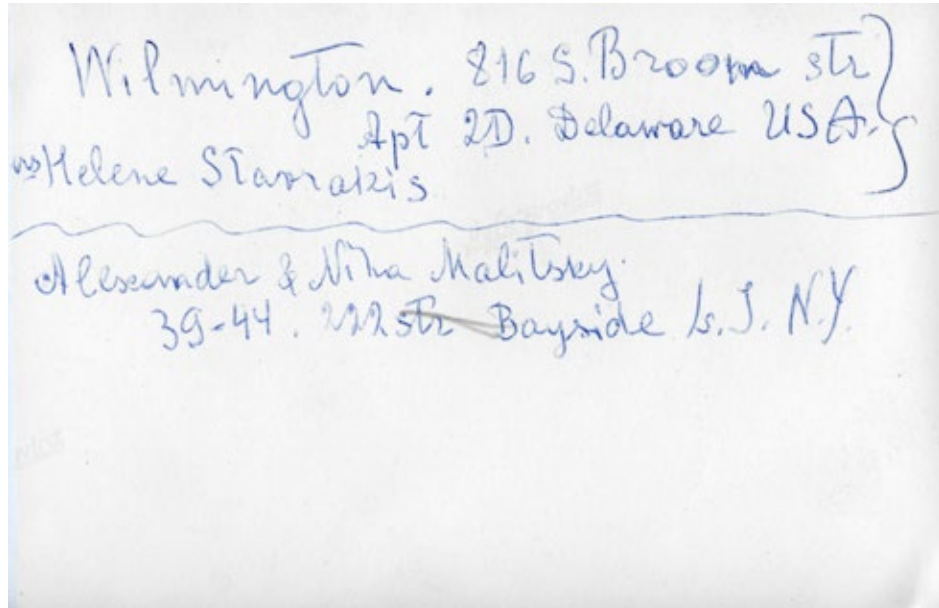
A letter Hughes sent to Peter concerning the affidavit.

Helen.

- 
- Hughes did not invite us from the goodness of his heart but for business..
- 

Dr. Hughes sponsored the family, and other refugees, to work as cheap labor for his household. The red tape along the road to sponsorship was long and complicated. For various bureaucratic reasons, it was difficult due to the post-war turmoil in Europe and the family's location in a remote rural area. In addition, Peter did not know any English and must have gotten someone to help write his letters to Dr. Hughes.

A card, probably Baba Anya's writing, with the Malitsky's address on it. (bottom). Nina Malitsky was the daughter of Jakov Ivanovich Pivovonsky, Peter's dear friend and mentor, and a famous surgeon in Kiev. She and her husband Alexander lived in New York and agreed to take responsibility for the family should they become indigent, which Dr. Hughes notably did not agree to do. The top the card also shows Helen and Peter's address in Wilmington, Delaware, 816 S. Broom St., Apt. 2-D.



Peter and Helen were required to have a second affidavit stating that if anything happened and they could not work, someone would accept responsibility for them, since Hughes had not agreed to. This they obtained through Peter's mentor and dear friend, the well-known surgeon Jakov Ivanovich Pivovonski, who saw them off when they left Kiev and cried knowing they would never meet again. His daughter, Nina Jakovlina Malitzki, lived in New York with her husband and agreed to give Peter and Helen an official notarized document which stated that if they and their children could not support themselves, Hughes would not be responsible for them—the Malitzki's would. They would not become "public charges."

As Helen said,

- 
- There was no welfare and it was forbidden to sleep in the streets. If no one
- was responsible for you, and you were indigent, they sent you back to your
- country of origin. There they would have hanged us...The Malitskys' took a
- big risk for us. It shows you what people are made of.
-

On the affidavit was written, “The hand of the one that gives never goes empty”.

They also had to sign a paper at the American Consul in Athens. At the consul, Helen remembered, the young man said, “We need people like you.” They signed a statement stating that if they couldn’t support themselves, they would be deported to their country of origin. Of course, deportation would have meant imprisonment or death.

Helen.

- 
- We went through a vigorous screening (at the consul). Even our shit was
- examined for amoebas. We had to take laxatives and only the second shit
- was taken. After that we went back, walking and by bus, to Shura’s place
- pale and with diarrhea. We did not let Shura know.
- 
- In this way, we got our papers and were leaving. The old folks were to remain.
- They were pretty depressed and saddened by this but in the meantime, they
- stayed in Picrodaphnis. We did not know for how long. Baba Anya and Deda
- Vench were completely down. We were gone and there seemed to them to
- be no future. But as luck would have it, in the US the policy changed toward
- Displaced Persons and they were given the right to enter (the US).”
- 

(They joined Peter and Helen later, when they had already moved to Broom Street in Wilmington, Delaware.)

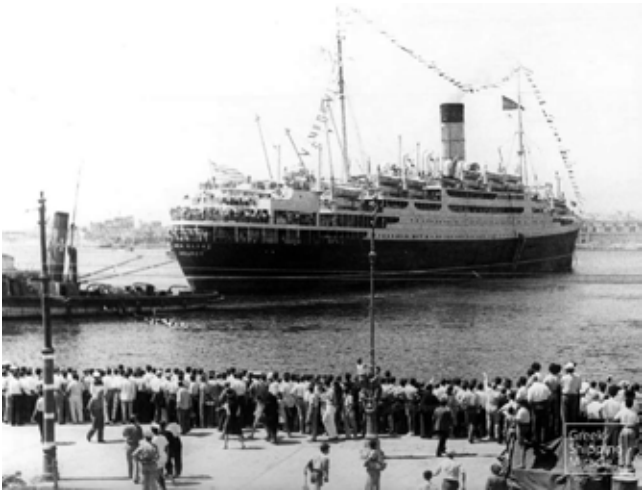
Finally, the sponsorship was approved. In Greece, their papers were thoroughly checked, because so many Greeks wanted to go to the US. There was one serious hitch, however; they had documents saying they were seeking permanent residence in the US, but Peter was demobilized from the Greek army and as such, wasn’t supposed to leave Greece for more than six months. Somehow the official checking the papers missed that part.

Helen.

- 
- On April 22, 1950, our neighbor drove us and numerous boxes of our sheets,
- towels, and other household items to Piraeus to board the TSS Nea Hellas,
- which was scheduled to sail to Hoboken, New Jersey via Naples, Lisbon,
- and Halifax. We were afraid Pop would be stopped and there was a tense
- moment when I took the children by the hand, took a deep breath, and went
- through the document line. They looked at our papers. We went through.
- Behind us walked Papa, and they checked his papers. He said nothing. He
- got through. We sat in the cabin of the boat, at the bottom. We were in third
- class where the men were separated from the women and children. We
- had a cabin with two bunks on each side for the three of us. The fourth was
- occupied by a single woman. After some negotiation and arguing, the purser
- agreed to let Pop stay with the family and he found the woman another
- room. The family was now together.
-

• Pop was seasick much of the time, lying under a thin army blanket on the  
 • lower bunk. The cabin was small and the bathroom was down a narrow  
 • corridor. A metal staircase extended up to the floor above. Next to us was  
 • berthed a huge beautiful white ship. I remember looking at the windows. It  
 • was tourist class. I looked through the porthole and when I saw that French  
 • ship standing still as we moved away, only then did I take a deep breath.  
 • And Papa was with us.  
 •  
 • When I felt the movement of the boat pulling away from shore there was  
 • such a sense of relief.

Olga was almost seven and Steven four. By this time, they had lived in Greece  
 for five years. They had a total of \$32.00 left from the money they had used to  
 buy tickets. Along the way, they had spent \$5.00 to visit Pompeii when the ship  
 stopped in Naples, a place they never got back to, and a day trip which Helen  
 always remembered fondly.



ancestry New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 for Petros Stylianos Stavrakis

Roll > T715, 1897-1957 > 7001-8000 > Roll 7521

MANIFEST NO. 193

SHIP NAME: NEA HELLAS

DATE: APR. 7, 1950

TABLE:

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Place of Birth	Year of Arrival	Remarks
1	STAVRAKIS Petros Stylianos 23	23	M	Greek	London, England, Electoral Registers, 1932-1965	1-30599	Name: Petros Stavrakis
2	STAVRAKIS Helen 7	7	F	Greek	London, England, Electoral Registers, 1932-1955	1-30598	Name: Helen Stavrakis
3	STAVRAKIS Olga 7	7	F	Greek	London, England, Electoral Registers, 1932-1955	1-30597	Name: Olga Stavrakis
4	STAVRAKIS Stylianos 7	7	M	Greek	London, England, Electoral Registers, 1932-1955	1-30596	Name: Stylianos Stavrakis



These photos show the Nea Hellas, the ship on which the family departed Athens at the Port of Piraeus where they had entered Greece, exhausted and on the run, five years previously. There is a copy of the ship's manifest with their names on them (the Greek versions). They boarded the ship on April 7, 1950 and arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey on April 22, 1950. There was a scary moment when boarding. Peter technically wasn't supposed to leave Greece for more than six months, as he was still in the Greek army, but no one noticed that he had no plans to return to Greece, and Helen wrote, "When I felt the movement of the boat pulling away from the shore, there was such a sense of relief."





The Hoboken Terminal, where Helen, Peter, Olga, and Steven set foot on American soil for the first time, on April 22, 1950. The start of a new life!

