# Lyubov Krimberg

*Romania*

My name is Lyubov Davidovna Krimberg, maiden name Morgenshtern, born in December 1919, in Kishinev, Moldova. My father fled to France in 1910 because of large pogroms in Kishinev,[1] and worked there as a taxi driver until 1912. My mother went to France and gave birth to my brother, but she grew homesick and returned to Kishinev. When World War I began, my father was in France and my mother was in Moldova.

My father returned to Moldova in 1918, the year before I was born. They were penniless, so my father remained in Kishinev. There wasn't much work available, but because he knew several languages (French, German, and Russian) he was able to work for the French rail company *Wagonlee*.[2] Each international train traveling through Europe had a special sleeping car with bulletproof glass for senior officials, so they needed people who knew many languages. I was five years old when my father was transferred to Bucharest, Romania, where we moved.

I went to school in Romania. When I was fifteen years old I went to ballet school at the Opera Theatre in Bucharest, where I studied for two years. At that time, Europe was already feeling some concern about Hitler's coming to power in Germany, and people were stocking up on salt, sugar, and other products. My brother was living in France, but in 1935 he came to Romania to serve there. Because of the way things had progressed, our parents wanted to send us to Palestine. In 1938 we went to Constanta and lived in a hotel, trying to get out of Romania.[3] The

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[1] A pogrom was an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jews in Russia or Eastern Europe.

[2] *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* was a company that made train cars, and was particularly known for its on-train catering and sleeping car services.

[3] Constanța, Romania. The port of Constanța is the largest port on the Black Sea and fourth largest in Europe.

Germans invaded Poland in 1939, and the hotel we lived in was surrounded by military members in civilian clothes. They mined the Black Sea at Constanta, but many Jews, wanting to escape, ran to boats and rafts and were killed by the mines in the water. We returned to Bucharest.

In June 1940, the Soviets entered Moldova (it's thought that the Soviet Union freed Moldova, but now it's said they occupied it).[4] The Moldovans were very happy the Russians had come, because Romanians considered Moldovans as third-class people. There were no higher educational institutes in Moldova, and there was no work. The young people went to Romania to work. My father went to the embassy in Bucharest to request approval for us to return to Kishinev, and when it was approved we left with what we had in our suitcases.

My father found work in Moldova as a railroad watchman. In May 1941, my mother became emotionally ill and entered a psychiatric hospital. When my mother was discharged from the hospital, we were told that she had to be kept away from all of the upheaval.

At that time they were making a movie in Moldova called "Bukuria," which translates as "Joy," and they needed dancers. I was selected among the other boys and girls to be in the movie. There were immigrants from many countries: Hungary, Bulgaria, and many more. We danced outside the city and had costumes, fake braids, and rag-like slippers on our feet. On June 22, 1941, I went to the hotel where our film crew was located to receive my first pay of 19 rubles. On my way home, I saw airplanes dropping bombs. At first I thought they were training aircraft, but then the bombs began to explode and people were torn to pieces. I experienced such fear that I cannot express it in words.

I barely made it home. My mother said she didn't understand what was happening, that in the morning airplanes had flown high in the sky shooting at each other. She thought it was probably training, but I said, "What do you mean 'training,' they just now bombed us!" The radio announcement that the war had begun was broadcast that day.

We thought the Soviet Army was strong, that they had the best army

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[4] Part of the Soviet Union's land grab following the secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact it made with Germany in 1939.

in the world and would drive out the Germans. My father went to his work, where his boss told him to bring his family to help with removing building materials and construction equipment. A rail line had been constructed from Kishinev to Artsiz near Ukraine, and we had to take out the whole thing to transport it east. We thought we would go as far as Tiraspol and return, but when we arrived the city was under attack. A bomb fell on a large gas tank, which exploded all around and killed our leader. My father was appointed to be in charge of the train. Other than me and my parents, there was no one else on the train. My sister had married by then, and was living separately. We eventually made it to Dnepropetrovsk, where she lived. As we evacuated Moldova, bombs fell both behind and in front of us.

We continued east from there, to Krasnodar, Russia, where we were told the train would not go any further. They sent us to a collective farm, where a Cossack woman received us very warmly. She treated us with dumplings and cherries, as well as cucumbers and tomatoes, and said, "How fortunate it is you've come, Moldovans. They tell us that Jews will soon come and take our children, cut them open and drink their blood." We didn't say anything.

A week later, as the Germans approached, we decided to go deeper into the Soviet Union. That same Cossack woman said, "Where are you going, dear people? You're Moldovans, no one will harm you." But my father said, "But we're the Jews you were afraid of," and she said, "That can't be. You look like us, and we were told Jews have lots of hair and wear strange hats." My father told her that the people who dressed like that were people of faith and would never harm anyone. "Somebody simply scared you," he said.

There were a lot of people on the passenger train, so I climbed up on a third-level bunk. In the morning my entire body was covered with lice. I was disinfected at the next station, where they put all my clothes in a vat of boiling water. Lice troubled us throughout the war.

A month later, we continued east, arriving in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. We were taken to the city and then to a collective farm. A man accompanied us to a house in which no one had lived for several years, and brought us hay to sleep in. The next morning I felt something soft

and warm under my leg. It turned out to be a mouse, and when we inspected the house that afternoon we found mouse holes everywhere.

We lived like this for a week, then asked the chairman of the collective farm what we could do. He said that there was a mine not far away (about 70 kilometers) where we could work and live in a dormitory. So we went to the mine. I was just twenty-one years old.

My father became a guard there, and I went to work in the open-air coal mine. My task was to open a set of doors when the coal came down after the men had blown up a certain area above me. There were horses with blinders beneath the doors, hooked to coal carts, so the coal fell through the doors into the open carts. I worked 12 hours a day doing this.

There were people at the mine who had been convicted of certain misdemeanors, such as being late for work. If you were late they took away some of your bread ration. People of various nationalities worked there, and many didn't speak Russian. I also didn't speak Russian. One woman taught me not to eat all of my bread, but to tuck a little away on my body. She said that rats can sense danger and will go to where there's bread. If I was sleeping and danger was present, the rats would wake me and I would be able to avoid it.

I worked like this for about two months, but the person who took the dynamite to the top of the mine either died or was sick, so I was put in that job. I would climb poles with a rucksack full of dynamite and give it to the miners on top. One day they didn't wait for me to climb back down, and blew up the coal just as the doors opened. I got lucky, because I was thrown through the doors into a cart along with the coal. I couldn't wait until the end of my shift, and when I arrived home I told my mother I wasn't going back to the mine, even if it meant being shot.

So I went with my pregnant sister to live with our brother in Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan, where he was working on the railroad. He got me a job as a pre-school teacher for two- and three-year olds of varying nationalities. Like me, the children didn't speak Russian. I would feed them, give them drinks, and when they were full they would lie in my lap and I would sing Romanian songs to them.

We all ended up working on a collective farm in Kazakhstan, in

terrible conditions. My father's job was to guard potato fields, and my mother would go to him during the day to fetch potatoes to boil. He was a very honest man, and would only pick up the potatoes that were on the ground. He was allowed to do this. Once, when my mother pulled up potatoes, and put them in her pocket to take home, my father told her he was a public servant, responsible for everyone, and wouldn't let her to take the potatoes. He told us to come to where he worked and we could eat there, but we were not allowed to take potatoes home.

When winter arrived and we had nothing to eat, my father went to the collective farm chairman (he was Jewish also) to ask for a little grain. The chairman said he was sure of my father's honesty, and that's why he had put him to work protecting the potato fields. The chairman said he knew my father wouldn't steal potatoes, but it was alright for our family to take some. He ordered grain for us too, and I walked 16 kilometers through mountain snow to get it to the mill. At the mill I had to use part of the grain to pay for them to grind it. We lived with constant hunger.

My sister's husband was released from the labor army and found us, then got work transporting grain at the collective farm. One day he stole a bag of grain and brought it home. My father made him return it, because we would have all been shot.

We moved again, and lived in Kyrgyzstan from 1943 to the beginning of 1944. There was a hydroelectric station being built, and they needed workers. They'd caught many Chechens and banished them to work on the station, but they were dying like flies from malaria and starvation. These fellows were worn out. My sister's job was to distribute bread tickets, giving each person that came to work a ticket for 600 grams of bread. She was required to return any extra tickets at the end of the day, and when I asked her once if we could take one ticket for ourselves and give our tickets to our parents, she refused. She said they'd put her in jail. I worked in a clinic distributing quinine for all the malaria, and took 400 or 500 grams of quinine as well.

My brother finally received notice that he could return to Moldova to work on the railroad there. He and his wife said goodbye and left, while we stayed in Kyrgyzstan: my father, mother, sister, and her little baby, who was born in 1942.

My father counted the days until the war would end. He wanted to go home very much. Our forces had already entered Hungary and Germany, and we felt the war would soon end. When construction on the hydroelectric station closed for lack of funds, we were left without food tickets.

One day a shopkeeper asked me to fix a sweater for him, because he knew I could knit. I took the sweater apart, and in two weeks knitted a new one for him. When I brought it to the shopkeeper, he gave us a piece of lamb for it. It was such a salvation. My mother cooked part of the meat and sprinkled a little grain on it, and we all ate. We put the corn we'd harvested from our garden on a couch, but ran out of corn during the winter.

One morning I tried to wake my father as he slept in his coat on a pile of hay. He didn't move, even after I touched him, and he was cold. My father had died in his sleep. When we removed his coat he was covered in lice. Someone brought a large piece of gauze for us to wrap my father in after we washed him, according to our law, and two men dug half of a grave, though they said they didn't have enough strength to continue after that. It was winter, and the ground was frozen. My sister and I finished digging the grave, and buried our father. I put a large white rock on top, but when I visited my sister 18 years later (she had stayed in Kyrgyzstan), I couldn't find the rock or the grave.

After my father died, my brother sent us money to buy grain and corn, and a cousin in Palestine found us and sent three bars of soap. It was so beautiful, shaped like eggs. We exchanged every piece of that soap for a sack of corn. And so we were saved.

One day in February 1945, as I washed up, my mother went to a neighbor for a piece of lit coal because our *pechka* had gone out.[5] We used hot coals to stoke the *pechka*, as no one had matches, but my mother tripped at the door and somehow the roof caught fire (it was made of reeds). I didn't see it, but I heard cries. When I looked out the window I saw a group of Kyrgyz people beating my mother. They believed that if a person burned their house it meant the devil was near. I ran out, naked

[5] A *pechka* was an oven that doubled as a furnace. In many cases people could sleep on them to keep warm in winter as well.

as I was from bathing, and they saw me. I frightened them and they ran off. We moved into a dormitory at the end of the village.

That same year, my mother and I contracted typhus and were taken to a hospital, where we heard the war had ended. I was twenty-five years old by then. I was awakened by cries of joy, and looked out a window where I saw our nurse kissing the head doctor. I wondered what had happened, and the nurse ran in and said that the war had ended. It was such a blessing! When a friend told me she was leaving for Kishinev, I went to the city center to get permission to go as well. I didn't exactly say where I was going, and I received authorization.

I don't know how I made it – perhaps out of desperation. By then it was all the same to me, so I wasn't afraid of anything. I had about six kilograms of cornmeal in my bag and no money. I had nowhere to live in Kishinev, but my friend's sister was a nurse and she dragged me to a hospital, where I slept on an operating room bed. I couldn't stay permanently, and didn't know where I would live.

I was so lucky to have such good people around me: it was just amazing. There was cold and hunger in the country, and there were notes on the trees in the market with peoples names and addresses. In this way, people were able to find each other after the war.

One day, in the market, someone called my name, a woman I'd met only once in Frunze. She was the sister of a friend and told me she worked at a communist party school, teaching village students who didn't know Russian. By that time, without ever studying the language, I knew Russian. Because I also knew Romanian and Moldovan, I could translate for the students. That night I slept in a train station, and in the morning I went to the party school and was immediately hired. They gave me a dormitory room and a young there brought me a little bread. I still didn't have a ration card.

Another friend arranged for me to work as a secretary for a doctor in charge of a clinic. He tried to get me to report on what the other workers were saying about him, but I refused. He couldn't fire me because I could use a typewriter, which not many could do. After another year I became the secretary at an education and economics agency, and rented space from a co-worker.

One day I found a tomato on my desk. As it turned out, our mechanic had put it there for me. He had such bangs and was always dirty and in overalls. He carried spare parts and keys and cursed. I knew that his name was Sasha, but I didn't know that he was Jewish. Besides being our mechanic, he was also our electrician.

On the first of May I went to a demonstration, and Sasha went with me. He was clean and well dressed. He asked if he could go along with me, and I answered by saying the streets were free and he could go where he wanted. He began looking after me, bringing me various things. Once he asked me what I slept on and what I used for a blanket. All I had was my shirt. He loaned me money to buy fabric that military coats were made from. When I married him I owed him 500 rubles.

We soon had a son, and a year after that my mother asked us to come to Kyrgyzstan, where she'd stayed. We went, but only stayed one year because there was no work. We returned to Kishinev with only three rubles between us, and were given a room, a sack of potatoes, a bag of flour, and a 20-litre bottle of vegetable oil. Soon we had a daughter, and we built a house that we slowly added rooms to over a thirty-year period.

My brother left Romania for America, and lived in Detroit, Michigan. He worked in an automobile factory and I corresponded with him. He sent a request for me to visit, but the Office of Visas and Registration denied it. I went to downtown Kishinev, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where I saw a telephone for the Moscow Ministry of Internal Affairs and immediately called Moscow. They scheduled an appointment, so I went. I told them I had a brother I hadn't seen in 30 years, and that my husband and children would stay in Moldova. They said the Office of Visas and Registration would issue the documents, but that didn't happen until Gorbachev came to power.

In November 1991, my husband and I left for America with our daughter, her husband, and their children. My son was not allowed to come because of his health. Three months later, he was able to leave, though all that time we didn't know if they'd let him go. My husband died in 2003.