

Irina Baskin, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Paris, March 1997, summary in English

*This is condensed summary of the main points of the interview, in the first person, not an exact translation.*

I was born in 1938 in Leningrad. My father was an engineer who worked in a factory. I was born before the war. My first memory is of a two-storied carriage, during the evacuation from Leningrad. My father remained on the platform.

We were in Omsk for a time. After the war, the factory went back to the town, and there was military discipline there. We lived in a communal flat until I was 17, and the people around us were similar. One of our neighbours came from a priest's family, they were from intelligentsia backgrounds.

There was little openness at home. I was from the generation which spent a lot of time at school.

There was hysteria at Stalin's death. I was ready to sob but did not do so.

I became very keen on classical music from the 1950s onwards. They did not manage to destroy the creative intelligentsia.

You are interested in how we formed our moral sense. It was partly at school, the Pioneers, the Komsomol, and then there was the city and its features. St Petersburg has a strong personality: taste, ethics, what is disgusting, aesthetics. This is the one Russian part that was never Sovietized. It was not liked in Moscow for that reason. Beautiful staircases, walls.

Once at school, I got a yellow ticket – a sign of disapproval. I was forbidden to go to the theatre. I was about 16. All this impeded them in the thrust of their education. I was a bit terrorized by this, but I eventually went to a theatre institute. Most of us went on to work in a factory.

According to my passport, I was a Jew. I discovered that it would be difficult for that reason. There was strict discouragement if you wanted to pursue another line. When I was 14 I refused to stand up for the new teachers.

I wrote very good essays and got very good marks. I had lots of questions. I was not very close to my parents. That was a feature of my character. I had an enthusiasm for cats that has lasted until today.

For a while I was at the Architectural Construction Technicum, which was nearer home. I liked architecture. After that I did three years on a project working with iron concrete. But I was interested in music and theatre.

There was a difference between the official values and being true to yourself, and everyone had to search for their position.

There was a Picasso exhibition in 1956 which struck me very much. We had no criteria to judge anything. People agreed to meet outside the exhibition. The second time this happened there was a large police presence. Students were thrown out of the institute. I began to understand what kind of society we were living in.

I had very little to lose in life. My moments of choice were as much naivety. I thought that whether or not it was dangerous, I had a right to my opinion.

I entered a theatre institute in 1962/63. I had to have three years of study, and then I went into the daytime part of the programme. I was in the department of the theory and history of theatre. I lived for the theatre and was very happy. I finished the Institute in 1967. I taught the history of theatre. I

had a personal story with the KGB because of my showing French films. I met a Frenchman who offered me films. We showed about 120 of such films, and 500 documentary films. Was this dissidence? I had eleven years of such a life. Because I was a critic, I tried to get to know my own country and spent a month travelling. I went around the country each year as a theatre critic, and some places where there were camps. The songs of Okudzhava and Vysotsky had begun to spread about.

I slept on the border of Poland and Belorussia on the evening of 21 August 1968, so I had my own impression of things.

Even the most Soviet people lived by conscience. I did not personally have a religious sense, but it was present in music and art. St Petersburg is not terribly religious.

I took the chance to go abroad. My Jewishness did not play a role in things. I have a mass of identities now – which is called modernization. Knowing the reality of the country which had just signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975, a relative implored me to go abroad and I left in 1978.