

## Russian emigre, 83, ends long path to freedom

*A widowed physician is granted permission to join daughter in NJ*

(August 4, 2010) – At 83, Raisa Sirota is enjoying her first taste of American life.

A physician from St. Petersburg, Russia, she was granted refugee status about a year ago, and arrived in West Orange in April, where she is living with her daughter and son-in-law, Evgenia and German Laufer.

Her arrival culminated a three-year battle with Russian immigration authorities, resolved with the assistance of HIAS, the international Jewish migration agency.

Sirota was among the approximately 200 Russian Jews per year who are given the status of refugees, according to HIAS, which — despite the large exodus of Jews from the former Soviet Union over the past 20 years — still monitors the persecution of Jews and other minorities in Russia and neighboring countries.

Asked what she likes best about living here, her eyes lit up and a broad smile broke out across her face. “Freedom,” she said, with her daughter and son-in-law translating during a reporter’s visit to their home.

Then she laughed. “I have finally found what Khrushchev and all the Soviet leaders always promised communism would bring: the perfect society where everyone is happy. My whole life was filled with shortages, difficult relationships, constant fear of being Jewish,” she said. “Now, I have come to a country that must be communist — everything is perfect!”

In a conversation followed by homemade blinis, salmon caviar, cookies, and tea served in porcelain cups brought from St. Petersburg, she described living through historic events, what it meant to be Jewish in Russia, and her ordeal trying to finally leave Russia.

Sirota was born a decade after the October Revolution into a family of prominent doctors on her mother’s side. Her mother was a physician and her father was an engineer. The family spoke Yiddish and celebrated Jewish holidays at home, but Sirota learned early to fear being Jewish. “We were afraid to go to synagogue — my parents could lose their jobs,” she said, according to Evgenia and German’s loose translation.

Only her uncle was allowed to purchase matza for Passover. He had lost a leg in World War II, and “no one would touch him,” she said.

“Everybody was also always a little bit afraid to visit the Jewish cemetery, afraid someone was watching. We just had this feeling. We were always afraid. As a Jew all the time when I was growing up

in Leningrad, I had a sense I could be punished or oppressed at any time.”

She was 14 when the siege of Leningrad began in 1941. “We went without food, electricity, without water. My mother wouldn’t let us go out of the house. She was afraid someone would eat us.” Her mother eventually succumbed to the famine and sickness that contributed to the deaths of an estimated one million people during the siege. She was just 43 and left behind Raisa, her brother, and their father.

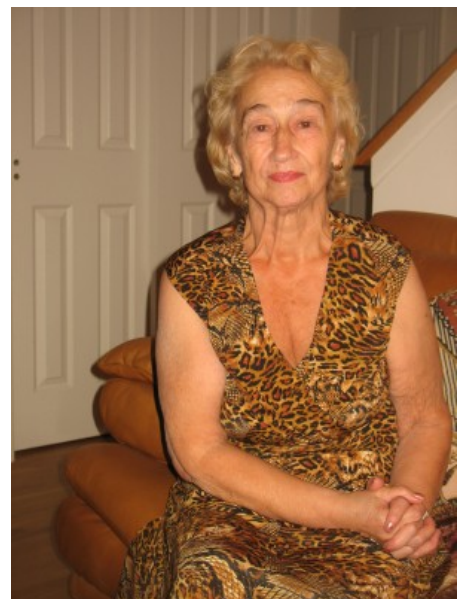
The war, however, offered Sirota one opportunity that would be closed for decades to Jews: the chance to go to medical school in 1944. The war effort needed doctors, regardless of nationality, and she was admitted.

But not long after she started working as a pediatrician in a clinic, she was caught in the Doctors’ Plot, a largely anti-Semitic campaign conceived by Stalin to persecute physicians and other intellectuals.

She nearly lost her license to practice medicine.

“There was so much propaganda that Jewish doctors wanted to kill people. Everyone was afraid to be treated by Jewish physicians,” she said. “I was the only Jewish doctor in the clinic where I worked. I went to visit a family, and I prescribed Vitamin D for a baby — this boy had a lot of problems stemming from vitamin deficiencies. But the mother was afraid to give him the vitamins, because of the propaganda. She thought it could be poison.

“In my clinic, everyone tried to create a case against me. The baby became worse because the mother didn’t give him vitamins. Everyone said he became worse because I gave him the wrong treatment. But the woman was honest and she said she didn’t give the medicine I had prescribed. They opened a huge case against me.”



**Raisa Sirota, 83, immigrated to New Jersey from Russia in April. She lives in West Orange with her daughter and son-in-law.**

After Stalin's death in 1953, his successors dropped the show trials and the overt propaganda against Jewish physicians.

"Fortunately, Stalin died and that saved my life," she said. "Otherwise, who knows, I might have had to go to Siberia with my baby," she said, referring to Evgenia.



**Photo of Raissa, bottom row, second from left, as a young woman in Russia. Photo courtesy Raissa Sirota**

### Too old to move?

The anti-Semitism never stopped. She wanted to complete the equivalent of a fellowship, or continuing medical education. "Somebody else was always sent, even those who weren't interested. Nobody ever said 'it's because you're Jewish,' but everyone knows it's understood."

Patients remained reluctant to call her because she was Jewish, she said.

She ultimately switched specialities, becoming a radiologist in 1960. But even there, she felt hostility from her colleagues, she said.

And yet when emigration restrictions on Soviet Jews were relaxed in the 1980s, Sirota stayed in Leningrad. In 1990, Evgenia immigrated to Israel, where she has a daughter from a previous marriage. Later she moved to the United States and married Laufer.

### Why did Sirota stay?

"I understood that I never could be a physician [anywhere else], not only because of the language barrier," she said.

And by the time the doors opened for Soviet Jews, Sirota and her husband, also a physician, were already in their 60s. They felt they were too old to start again.

Despite the new openness of the Gorbachev regime and those that followed, Sirota saw no shift in popular attitudes toward Jews.

"When you're a Jew in Russia, you feel it in your skin," she said. "People don't change that quickly. In everyday life, I didn't feel any different."

In 2000, she and her husband decided it was time to go. By the time their application was accepted, however, he had grown very ill and they could not

make the trip. After he died in 2005, she could not immigrate because his name had been on the application.

Her apartment was near a synagogue. She thought she could finally learn about Judaism without fear of reprisals from government agents. But little had changed in society. She had stones thrown at her, swastikas drawn in the hallway of her apartment. One day, someone pushed her down and said, "Jew, what are you still doing here? Why don't you leave?" she recalled.

Three years ago, she decided to reapply. But the interview went poorly.

"They were aggressive, very hostile. There was a wall separating us and I spoke through a translator. They questioned everything and were very negative. They didn't hear me, they didn't trust me." Her application was denied.

Evgenia called HIAS, and its Moscow director, Leonard Terlitsky, became involved. HIAS helped coordinate the appeal on both sides of the ocean, managing legal formalities, sending letters to the American Embassy, helping Sirota meet various medical requirements, visiting with her in Leningrad, and calling both mother and daughter every step of the way.

Sirota's case is "quite unusual," according to HIAS' Genever McBain, in that she was granted permission to leave after declining to use the initial permission and then had a second application denied. But, McBain said, "It does happen occasionally."

A year ago, Sirota was granted permission to leave.



**Photo of Raissa as a young woman in Russia. Photo courtesy Raissa Sirota**

Sirota has reconnected with people who immigrated long ago, including a old close friend from medical school who happened to attend the same adult day care center in Jersey City where she spends some of her time. She continues to be in touch with staffers at HIAS. "We are very grateful to [all of them] for their attention to my mother's situation and valuable advice," said her daughter.

Asked what it means to her to be Jewish here in New Jersey, Sirota said, "For the first time, I feel no pressure. I feel wonderful! Now I'm just a normal person," she said. "I meet people from different backgrounds and I don't feel different, and there's no tension. I'm feeling very happy!"