

**Separated by a gulf of more than
70 years, an elderly woman is
finally reunited with her long...**

Lost Sister

She was raised in the lap of Communism, a loyal daughter of the Soviet motherland. Josef Stalin was her hero; a fierce KGB officer, Vasily Tzimafovich, was her father. For her entire life, she had believed that her birth name was Jonna. Then, this past spring, just before Purim, she received an unexpected telephone call that turned her life upside-down.

A Jewish woman had been lost to her family – and her people – for 72 years. After decades of relentless searching by family and friends, she was at last located and reunited with her family just months ago. This is the incredible story of Nechama'le, a victim of galus and a symbol of the resilience of the Jewish nation, as shared with Zman by the primary movers in this remarkable narrative.

- Shimon Rosenberg

Although she had been forewarned by her brother of the nature of this phone call, the elderly Russian woman was totally unprepared for what she heard. Her face turned ashen and her feet began to buckle under her as she listened. The news conveyed by the friendly voice of the young woman on the other end came as an utter shock.

“I want you to know that you are a Jewish woman,” the voice said. “Your name is not Jonna but Nechama’le. Your parents were Jews, and loved you dearly. You have relatives in America and Israel who miss you. They have been searching for you for decades.”

Jonna/Nechama’le labored to catch her breath. She had lived for 72 years in the belief that she was a typical non-Jewish Russian woman. Now that illusion came crashing down around her.

That fateful phone call took place this past February. For 72 years, the woman known to all as Jonna Tzimafovich had enjoyed a happy life. Her father was a KGB officer who was regarded as a national hero. He had led a band of partisans that carried out daring sabotage operations against the German occupying forces during World War II. Jonna Tzimafovich had enjoyed a privileged upbringing as a member of the Soviet elite, including access to the best education the Soviet system offered. She had married the son of a high-ranking Communist Party member.

Now, she suddenly learned that she was not the person she had always believed she was. The man and woman she had known as father and mother were not her biological parents at all. Her real name was Nechama Zintovsky and she had relatives in America and *Eretz Yisrael*. These included a sister who had not slept soundly at night for 72 years, ever since the day Nechama



Jewish cobbler in Belarus.

had been handed over to the non-Jewish woman who promised to take her in. That woman had saved Nechama from certain death.

Just weeks ago, Jonna was reunited with her sister Sarah in an extremely emotional reunion. It was the climax of a 20-year search carried out by a few amateurs with no prior experience in missing-persons investigations. The group was motivated by a deep sense of responsibility to return a lost Jewish woman to the faith of her fathers.

Recently, *Zman* sat down with the Reches family as they recounted the incredible story. Its eventual resolution came about thanks to the steely determination of the matriarch, Miriam Reches. Her unwavering resolve caused a family that had been lost to the Jewish people to return to the fold. We are proud to share this real-life drama with our readers, as we heard it from Miriam Reches and her children.

Haven in Finland

Even before World War I, Russian Jewry had been suffering for decades from violent, state-sponsored, czar-inspired pogroms.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was met with widespread joy by much of the Jewish community, as the Bolsheviks promised equality for all—even the Jews. Only later did the Jews discover, to their horror, that the Communists’ oppressive laws and outright persecution of Jews accomplished what the worst of the Czars had not: stamping out the practice of Judaism almost entirely. Hardly a trace of Judaism survived in the entire, vast expanse of the Soviet Union.

The Zintovskys were an upstanding Jewish family from Vitebsk, Belarus. The father, Menachem Munye, worked hard to provide his family a bit of bread and soup for supper, while his wife, Basya Rivkah, cared for their children. Due to the political climate, they could not provide their children with a formal Jewish education, but the Zintovskys did their best to implant a love for their heritage. Their financial situation was very grim. They labored under the Communist system, with the equal poverty that it offered for all. Hunger was common.

And then, their situation took a drastic turn.

In November 1939, two months after the outbreak of World War II, Russia attacked neighboring Finland. Formerly a part of the Kingdom of Sweden, Finland had been occupied by the Russian Empire since 1809. During the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the Red Army of the Bolsheviks battled the White Army of the Czar, Finland seized the opportunity to declare its independence. At the time, the newly formed Bolshevik government was too weak to protest. Now, the Soviet Union was hoping to reclaim the territory it had lost.

The outbreak of the war had caused the Soviet Union to become uneasy about its security. In particular, the large city of Leningrad was just 25 miles from the Finnish border—too close for comfort. As a result, the Soviet leadership demanded that Finland cede its territory near Leningrad in exchange for parts of Soviet-controlled Karelia. When Finland rejected Russia’s ultimatum, the Soviet Union used this as an

excuse to regain its lost territory – ideally, all of Finland – by force.

On November 30, 1939, the Soviets attacked Finland with 20 divisions, outnumbering the Finnish forces three to one. They also had 30 times as many airplanes and 100 times as many tanks as the Finns. Nevertheless, the Finns succeeded in holding off the Soviet forces for a while, even driving them back in some places. Eventually, the Soviet command was reorganized and Finland was swiftly crushed by the invaders. By mid-March 1940, the Finns had put their signature to the surrender document. Under the terms of the peace treaty, Finland ceded 11% of its territory and 30% of its economy to the Soviet Union.

Unwilling to subject themselves to the reign of terror under Soviet Premier Josef Stalin, thousands of Finns left their possessions and fled their homes for the safety of independent Finland. Miriam Reches described what followed: “Wanting to settle the place, and to give Russian citizens an incentive to move there, Stalin announced that whoever went to live there would not have to pay taxes. My grandfather and grandmother grabbed the offer, since in



Street in the Jewish quarter of Vitebsk.



The Great Synagogue of Vitebsk.