

Isroel Lempertas With His Schoolmates



This is a group picture of the 6th grade of state Lithuanian lyceum in Mazeikiai, where I studied. The fifth to the left in the second row is me. To the right from me is the smallest boy, Boris Mendelevich, the son of our landlord lady. He died in occupation. The last to the right is my friend Meishke Mietskiewich, he left for Leningrad shortly before the war was unleashed. He was in the lines and died in 2000. The fourth to the right in the top row is Jacob Gusev. He also died during occupation. The picture was made in Kaunas in late 1930s. There was an elementary Jewish school in Mazeikiai. I had studied there for couple of months and got ill. I was taught by my father and crammed for the lyceum by a tutor who came to us. I entered the 4rd grade of Lithuanian elementary school. Having finished it, I entered to the state Lithuanian lyceum. . In general, mostly Jews, my classmates, were my friends, I remember Boris Mendelevich, son of the owner of butcher store, Jacob Gusev, Meishke Mitskievich. All of them perished during occupation. There were Lithuanian guys in the class up till 1938. We got along with them. In general, there were very few anti-Semitists in Lithuania. I think, Lithuania was one of those countries, there anti-Semitism was rather weak as compared to the other countries, especially by the middle 1930s. Before 1924 there was a 'golden age' for Jews in Lithuania. Jews were not oppressed in any way. There were Jews in parliament, when in 1926 there was a coup d'etat in Lithuania. Tautininki came to power, there was an end to democracy. Communist party, 60% consisting of Jews, was banned. Jews were driven out from parliament and from leading positions in the state. But, that was not it. Dictator Smetona, came to power and he thought that Lithuanians should be leaders and the rest should keep quiet and help Lithuanians make a happy state. Though, Smetona treated Jews pretty well and we practically felt no anti-Semitism. Of course, in every day life anti-Semitism was displayed in different ways. There were Zionist organizations in the town, including Betar and Maccabi. I did not go deep in the politics I joined 'Maccabi', where I played ping-pong and communicated with people of my age. In 1938-39 pro-Nazi public opinion was streamlined in Lithuania. When soviet soldiers came in our town in June 1940 many people welcomed them hoping for a better life. There was a train with soviet militaries and couple of tanks. I remember I and other boys rushed there, encircled

the soldiers and tried to speak Russian to them, though we hardly knew anything in Russian. Many guys boasted on stars from the fore-and-aft caps the soldiers gave them. First there was a state of all-in-all euphoria. During the first day there was a meeting on the central square. My father took the floor. He welcomed soviet soldiers in his mother tongue-Yiddish. For the first time within many years Yiddish was heard from tribune in Mazeikiai. Then meetings were held almost every week and almost the whole town got together to listen to the speakers. Euphoria gave way to disillusionment. Many products vanished from the stores. Only one sort of bread remained and it was low-grade. There were hardly any manufacture goods, including soap and napkins. Nationalization was commenced. The bank where father was employed, was nationalized, but father kept on working there. People who owned any type of property or hired workers, were arrested and exiled to Siberia. Our lyceum was declared a secondary school and the 7th grade of lyceum was the 9th grade at school. Other than that things were the same. I entered Komsomol organization. I was rather active- conducted meetings, called upon people to support soviet regime, drew wall posters. One year with the Soviets went by very quickly. On the 21st of June 1941 we had school-leavers party at school. I came home late and did not stay in bed for a long time. Early in the morning we heard the roaring of the planes. The town was bombed. Great Patriotic War was unleashed.