

Mera Shulman In Her Childhood



This is a photograph of me at the age of one. It was taken in a small Latvian town Livani, situated to the north-west from Daugavpiils. Judging from a bow in my hair, That was my first birthday. Most probably it was taken by an invited photographer. If it is true, the photograph was taken on June 22, 1926. Possibly the ball in the string-bag I got as a present.

I was born in Riga [Latvia] in 1925. I was the eldest child. Immediately after my birth our family moved to Livani to my paternal grandfather. Father wanted to work there, save money and go back to Riga being already well-to-do. First five years of my life I spent in Livani in the house of my grandfather. During 4 years and 9 months I was the only child of my parents, and then their second child (my sister) was born. I loved my sister very much, but when she was born it was difficult for me to get used to the idea that I was no more the only daughter of my Daddy and Mum. Probably, that was the reason why I broke my favorite doll to pieces, when at the age of several months my sister touched it. When I grew up, I made good friends with my sister. We were on terms of intimacy with her. 11 years later my brother was born. I was not so close with my brother in compare with my sister, possibly we were affected by a great difference in age: 11 long years. I remember myself doing my lessons, and my little brother lying in my lap. At that time there were no pampers, therefore my relatives used to say 'Mera, come to dry your knees!'

My paternal father had a house in Livani, where I spent first five years of my life. This sort of houses keep their visage for years, therefore I think, that at that time I found it the same as it was long before. Its outer entrance hall was very dark: the walls were papered with Russian

newspapers. Russian letters seemed to me very strange, and at the age of three I asked my Mum 'What do these hen tracks mean?' Mum named the letters, and that was the way I learned to read Russian. Earlier there was a garden around the house, but later it disappeared. I got to know about it from my father: there grew plum-trees, they gave rich harvest. Grandfather sent my daddy to collect plums from the ground, and my daddy simply opened the garden gate and let in pigs from the neighboring gentile's garden; the pigs quickly helped my daddy to manage his task.

Neighbors were different: both Jews and gentiles. Livani was, perhaps, more Jewish shtetl, but many Latvians lived there too. Daddy told about their neighbor, a tailor Moshe Sandler. When he wrote down client's measurements, he wrote 'Di' (he meant the Yiddish feminine article) and then the figure. Then again 'Di' and again figure. His explanation was the following 'The first 'Di' means 'Di Leng' [length], and the second 'Di' means 'Di Breyt' [width].

The owner of that house in Livani was my paternal grandfather - a very silent and modest man. He had typical appearance of a handsome Jew. He frequently walked around the house wearing tallit and tefillin. He used to read siddur. He never played with children. Probably his character was influenced by the absence of one eye: once being engaged in sewing boots, he wounded his eye by an awl and his eye came out.