

Mera Shulman With Ruins Of The Riga Synagogue As Background



This photograph was taken in Riga in winter of 1993. It was taken by my husband.

In 1993 we went to say good-bye to the family of my sister, who were going to emigrate to the USA altogether. Certainly we went to the old Jewish cemetery to give the last glance at the native graves. At the cemetery there is a tombstone with the following inscription 'In commemoration of all gentiles, who saved 55 Jews at the risk of their life.' This inscription is made in Hebrew and in Lettish. We also visited that place, where the synagogue was situated: that very synagogue, which we visited together with our parents during our childhood. The synagogue was burnt down during the time of occupation. People built some sort of memorial from its ruins.

After departure of my sister's family from Riga I never visited it: the city became deserted for me. And I always loved my native city Riga very much. It was a large and beautiful city, and so many relatives and friends I had there before the war! We liked to walk round the city, to date near the famous clock in the city center! I do not know the number of Jews there, but I know for sure that they were many. I also can tell nothing about the Riga Jewish community: this term was not in use at that time. In the city there were several synagogues (I remember the following names: Gogolshul, Petershul [the synagogues were called this way due to the names of streets they were situated in: Gogol Street and Peter Street) and a Jewish cemetery. Certainly, there were both rabbis, cantors and shokhetim, I do not know how many they were. I remember that my Mum bought hens in the market and carried them to shokhet. And in 1936, when my brother was born, they arranged circumcision for him on the eighth day (according to Tradition) directly in the maternity house, where my Mum gave him birth. So he was discharged from the maternity house being a Jew already.

In my childhood there were no more cheders in Riga. And my daddy finished cheder. The schoolboys were guaranteed that after they finished that educational institution they would be able to write 'Jewish letter with Russian address'. That was their maximum program. By the way, I keep

my father's letter in Russian: 'My dear children, I am THAFE and THOUND, and THISH you the THAME.' [It should be read the following way: I am safe and sound, and wish you the same. But it was written in Russian with very specific mistakes (Yiddish accent)]. There were a lot of different Jewish schools there: Hebrew, Yiddish, and Hebrew with Ashkenazi bias. Among these schools there were both secular and religious ones. In Riga there were Jewish hospitals. People could choose a hospital according to their income: expensive ones, of average cost or charity hospitals for poor. There were mikves at the city bath-houses.

There was no special place (ghetto) in Riga for compact residing of Jews. Jews lived in apartments they could afford.

I do not remember any special manifestations of Anti-Semitism in my childhood. Perhaps only one unpleasant episode comes to my memory. One day in the park the Holiday of Children (I do not remember when it was celebrated) was celebrated. Schoolchildren took seats in front of the rostrum. Front rows were occupied by schoolboys of a Latvian school (I studied at Hebrew school). They saw us and started bothering us. We simply left, and on our way spoke to each other 'Was it necessary for us to be present there? Haven't we ever seen gentiles?' It was very unpleasant, but not insulting. We felt confident because we were able to choose school, friends, environment; we did not feel bound down.