

Maria Griper



My aunt Maria Begam, my mother's sister, and her pet - her only friend. The photo was taken in Moscow in 1978. This is the last picture I received from Aunt Maria. My mother was the oldest sibling. She had a younger sister, my favorite aunt Maria, born in Vilno in 1897. Maria was an actress in the Jewish and Polish theater for some time. She married a producer - a Jew called Grigory Cherepover. Later he changed his last name to Griper. He worked at the Jewish theater in Kiev for some time. Before the war he had a job with the Moscow cinema studio. I know that a famous Jewish writer Isaac Babel was his friend. They were planning to make a film called *The Wondering Stars*, based on a book by Sholem Aleichem. Babel came to their house to discuss their plans. Some time later, in the 1930s, my aunt was summoned to the KGB office where she was told to report on every word that Babel and Grigory were saying. They told her, 'Babel visits you. You are a Soviet patriot and you must listen to what they talk about and report to authorities on every word you've heard'. My aunt Maria was shocked. There were two officers in the office. One of them went out and then the other whispered to my aunt that she might refuse. When the first one came back she said that she couldn't do it. She became hysterical and they told her to go. In 1939 Babel was arrested. Maria's husband was a talented man, but he began to drink. My aunt divorced him. She graduated from the Institute of Libraries and worked at the Historical Library in Moscow for many years. Her son grew up a selfish man; and my aunt committed suicide at the end of her life. He treated her awfully while she had dedicated her whole life to him. He was a photographer in the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. They got a beautiful apartment in the suburbs of Moscow. I visited aunt Maria several times. She was so happy to see me. Shortly after my last visit her son Alik sent me a telegram, which read, 'My mother fell asleep like a little bird'. She took soporifics. She was terribly lonely. Alik is in Israel now, and we don't keep in touch with him.