

Leonid Kotliar With Her Mother Rachil Kotliar, Aunt Tania Risman And Brother Roman Kotliar



From left to right (upper row): my mother Rachil Kotliar and her sister Tania (Toibl) Risman. Lower row: I with my brother Roman Kotliar. My mother had returned from hospital (she had breast cancer and had a surgery). We were having a stroll in a park and had this photo taken by a photographer. Kiev, 1927.

My father met my mother Rachil Risman living in Kiev in the garret in 1920. She and her sister Toibl escaped to Kiev from a pogrom in Makarov town shortly after the revolution of 1917. My parents got married in 1921. Those were trying times and they didn't have a wedding party.

I was born in Kiev on 28 January 1922. My father registered me by the Russian name of Lusia. He liked the way it sounded: my father's acquaintances in Kiev had a grandson named Lusik.

We lived in the garret around the perimeter of the house on the fourth floor. My mother, my father, my mother's older sister Tania (Toibl by her birth certificate) and I were living in a small room. My parents and Tania spoke Yiddish at home, but at times they switched to Russian. They spoke Yiddish with an accent of provincial Jews. My mother was quick-tempered, but it didn't mean that she wasn't kind and nice.

On 20 July 1924 my younger brother Roman was born into this world. He was named after my mother's brother Ruvim, but he was given a Russian name that sounded alike to not emphasize on his Jewish origin. My parents didn't observe Jewish traditions: it was a period of struggle against religion, and authorities tried to develop atheism in us. However, my father told us how they celebrated Pesach, Rosh Hashanah, Chanukkah and Purim in Tetiyev. There were mainly Jews living in our garret, but I don't remember anybody openly celebrating Jewish holidays. There were 4-5

tenants in each of 28 rooms. There was a long corridor where many children were running to and fro. I remember older children singing rhymes:

'Away, away with monks, rabbis and priests,

We shall climb heavens and chase away all gods'.

There were two water taps in the garret. Tenants cooked on primus stoves in the corridor and there was a toilet in the yard. When I was 12 there was a toilet installed in one end of the corridor and a year later there was another toilet installed. There was an electric bulb in each room and there was a power consumption meter. All tenants paid their fees based on their bulb's capacity. The corridor was lighted through glass door windows above the doors and there was some light produced by stoves. Tenants of the garret hated electric irons, boilers and radios that appeared in the late 1930s since it was impossible to control the power consumption.

My mother's sister Tania didn't have a profession. She worked in a diner and was a housewife. My mother got cancer and had one breast amputated. Then doctors discovered stomach cancer. She died in 1929. My mother was buried in the Lukianovskoye Jewish cemetery. As far as I remember, there were no rituals observed. I remember a rabbi reciting a prayer in Hebrew in the cemetery. Aunt Tania replaced my mother to my brother and me. She was very kind to us and a few years later my father married her.

I went to school in 1930. Minister of education Skripnik thought that children had to study in their national schools. I didn't want to go to a Jewish school since Jews were always teased. I wanted to go to a Russian school since we spoke Russian in the yard and in the street. My father decided that I had to choose myself. He went through pogroms and anti-Semitism and wanted Roman and me to assimilate. I had to take tests in a Jewish school. A teacher asked me questions in Yiddish and I pretended I didn't understand her. The teacher knew that my parents were Jews, but since I didn't understand Yiddish she sent me to a Ukrainian school. They registered national origin at school and my classmates knew I was a Jew, but nobody disturbed me. We were pioneers and were raised to be internationalists.