

Balbina Lewin



This is a studio portrait of my mother, Balbina Cohn, nee Lewin. It was taken in Warsaw in 1916.

My mother was born in 1898. Her unique name was the product of somebody's imagination. My mother was always a little ashamed of her name. She blamed her father for that. She asked why he'd given her such a silly name. He joked: 'Well, I asked you but you didn't say it was a bad name.'

I don't know any stories about my parents' childhoods. My mother went to a Russian gymnasium, I think. That's why she spoke Russian very well. She studied chemistry at Warsaw University, but she didn't finish, but my father, who studied at the Warsaw Polytechnic, did finish. I think my mother attended all her classes but she didn't get her certificate. I think she and my father met during their studies.

My parents got married in a synagogue. That was an exception, in a sense. They weren't religious at all; they weren't even believers. Perhaps someone wanted it, it was somebody's wish - I can't say why it happened. But that has stuck in my mind. I remember that it was something of a curiosity in my parents' circles. Once, a friend of my father's came to Warsaw, and I remember that when he met my mother, he said, 'This is the beautiful Bela who got married in a synagogue!'