

Sophia Belotserkovskaya With Her Mother



This is a picture of me and my mother Rachil Belotserkovskaya. The photo was taken in Kiev on my birthday sometime in the middle of the 1930s. My mother was born in Odessa in 1898. At the age of three she performed on the stage of the Opera Theater in an episode of the opera 'Little mermaid'. From then on her soul belonged to the theater. She dreamed of becoming an actress. She learned to play the piano. After finishing grammar school she went to study at the Froebel Institute, which trained teachers for children's institutions. She worked as a governess for rich families for some time. In 1922 a young man approached her asking her in Ukrainian, 'Do you know where I could find a place to stay?' My mother was surprised that a young man of typical Jewish appearance spoke such fluent Ukrainian. It was even more surprising to her because in her family and in Odessa people spoke Russian. She became even more interested when she got to know that he was working at the drama theater, which was on tour in Kamenets-Podolsk. This young man was my father-to-be, Lev Belotserkovski. He was an actor and prompter with the Kiev Ivan Franko Drama Theater. They fell in love and got married. They had a civil ceremony and a small wedding party to which my father's friends from the theater came. Although the bride and bridegroom came from religious families they didn't have a Jewish wedding. My mother 'contracted' my father's love of the Ukrainian language. She studied Ukrainian for several months. Then she began to work in the theater, where she recited poems by Pavlo Tychyna. My mother was very pretty and soon began to play minor roles in the theater. In early 1923 the government issued an order for the Ivan Franko Theater to move to Kharkov, which was the capital of Ukraine at that time. I was born on 11th April 1925 and named Sophia after my grandmother. When I was three months old I fell ill with poliomyelitis and my mother quit work. She spent a lot of time with me and massaged my legs, but I remained an invalid. My mother began to sew at home. I began school in 1932. My parents decided that I would have no problem learning Russian since everybody around us spoke it and therefore sent me to a Ukrainian school. A Jewish school was out of the question. Although my parents always identified themselves as Jews and even exchanged phrases in Yiddish, my father spoke Ukrainian because his profession required it. Besides, my parents were typical Ukrainian intellectuals of Jewish origin. The saddest memory of my childhood is the famine in Ukraine in

1932-33. I even dreamed of white bread at night. I remember that my mother refused to buy me a bun averting her eyes from me - this was my mother, who loved me more than I could think of. I remember long evenings when my mother and I were waiting for my father to come back from the theater. He could buy two sandwiches at the canteen without food coupons. He brought us these delicacies wrapped in tissues.