

Liya Epshteyn



This is me at the age of 7. The picture was taken in Tallinn in 1937. I had a nanny in early childhood, who spoke German, therefore the first words spoken by me were in German. In general, our family spoke several languages. Since childhood Father spoke Yiddish and German. Father was proficient in German as he had studied in Germany for several years. My parents spoke only Yiddish with each other and my grandmothers. Mother preferred Russian to German as she grew up

in Belarus, then in Narva, and the latter bordered on Russia. The majority of the population there spoke Russian. Thus, I spoke German with Father, and Russian with Mother. I played with Estonian children in the yard, so I quickly picked up Estonian. My parents were also fluent in Estonian. It was natural for us. One could not live in the country without knowing its language. When I grew up, my nanny left her job and I was taught by a governess. On weekends we went out of town and spent time on the coast and in the forest. It was safe to live in Tallinn. Life was calm. People could go out any time of the day, even in pitch dark night and there was nothing to fear. There were constables on duty for twenty-four hours. They were riding along the streets and made sure that there was order. People were different at that time. They used to respect people around them. I loved reading since childhood. I learned how to read long before school, and was glued to books. I read in Estonian and Russian. My parents bought me books for children. In 1938 I went to a private Estonian lyceum. I did well. There were three Jewish girls in my class, including me. Teachers and students treated us well, and we did not feel 'strange' and 'foreign.' One of the girls in my class was shot by Germans in Tallinn in 1941, the other one is still alive. There were Jews Estonians, Russians among my lyceum friends.