

Hana Gehtmann



This is my sister Hana Gehtmann photographed in Kiev in 1935 on the occasion of her admission to Kiev Industrial College. My parents were poor. My father Aron Gehtmann was a joiner and my mother Sura Gehtmann [nee Wainshtein] was a housewife. My father was different from other Jews. He liked parties and drinking, and he loved women. In 1920 my mother had another boy, Ehil, named after my grandfather, who had died shortly before. She wasn't attractive any longer and my father lost interest in her. He began to see a Russian woman called Evdokia. There were no arguments in our house. My father just left my mother with the three children. My mother fell ill after my father left. She refused to eat or breastfeed the baby. It was a period of famine [in Ukraine] and it was hard to get milk. The baby was given cow milk with some water, contracted enteric fever and died. My mother died shortly after the baby's death. My sister Hana and I lived with my grandparents for some time. We starved. I even remember my grandfather saying that we

were a burden to them. My cousin Olte and Dvoira often came to see us. They brought us some food, but it wasn't enough. We were getting swollen from hunger. Uncle Abram, my mother's younger brother, came from Kiev and made arrangements for us to get into a children's home. It was a Jewish children's home in Tomashpol: a one-storied building with about 40 children and a few teachers. We didn't learn anything. We played a lot and spoke Yiddish. I don't remember any celebration of religious holidays there; I don't remember any holidays from my childhood. It seems to me now that there were none. I felt lonely in the children's home since my sister Hana, who was three years older than I, was in another class and spent little time with me. We moved from one children's home to the next. For some reason children's homes were closed down, just to be opened in another location. My sister and I were separated. She was sent to Bratslav and I went to Gaisin. I went to a local Jewish school when I was in one of those children's homes, and my sister studied in a Jewish school in Bratslav. When we were to move to another children's home my friends asked our teacher to send me to the children's home in Bratslav. That's how we reunited. In 1929 Hana wrote to Abram asking him to take us away from the children's home. He told us to wait until the summer vacations, but we couldn't wait any longer. In early spring, as soon as the snow had melted, Hana took me by the hand and we left the home. We headed to nearby Tulchin, where Dvoira's son Fridl worked as a blacksmith. We met a balegole [Yiddish for coachman] on the way. He asked where we were going. He happened to be riding to Tulchin and told us to get on the cart. My sister said that we didn't have money, but he just laughed and said, 'Get on, kids!' He took us to Fridl's house. Fridl sent a telegram to Uncle Abram in Kiev, saying, 'The children ran away from the children's home'. Abram was a student at Kiev Industrial College. He came and took us with him to Kiev. In 1932, during the period of famine in Ukraine, the children's home was to move to Zvenigorodka near Kiev. I don't know why we had to move so often. By that time Hana had finished school, and I didn't want to go there alone. I asked my uncle to take me from the children's home. My uncle said that he would under the condition that I went to work since he couldn't provide for us in those hard times. So, I just finished five years at school and never continued my studies. My sister went to study at the Rabfak and lived with Uncle Abram. She studied very well and was transferred to the second year. Uncle Abram helped me to enter a vocational school at Kiev Locomotive Repair Plant. I worked at the plant and studied. Life was very hard. This was a period of famine. My uncle helped me to get a job in a shop, where I had to carry heavy planks to get 800 grams of bread per coupons. I got very tired at work.