

Sima Shvarts As A Young Girl



This is a photo of me. The photo was taken around 1916/17 in Rzhishev. My name is Sima Markovna Shvarts. I also have a Jewish patronymic - Yankel-Mordkovna Shvarts. I was born in the town of Rzhishev, Kiev region, on 19th January 1914. I never knew my father because he was killed in the war [WWI]. In Rzhishev we lived in my mother's parents' house. I can vaguely remember that house because I was only four years old in 1918, when we moved to Kiev. I

remember that there was one big room and two bedrooms. As I mentioned before, grandfather used the big room to teach children. There was also an attic where they kept winter clothes and shoes, as well as the kosher kitchen utensils [for Passover]. According to my mother's stories, my grandparents were very religious and strictly observed the kashrut, Jewish traditions and holidays. But I don't remember any of these things. I know only that on holidays, especially on Passover, grandfather tried to get all his family together under the roof of his own house. I remember almost nothing of our life in Rzhishev before we moved to Kiev, but I can vividly remember the Jewish pogrom. Maybe I remember it so well because I was in stress because of the fear. One night, when the light was put out (there was no electricity then) and we went to bed, suddenly we heard whistles, noise, and clatter. Bandits came to the town on horses. I don't know if they went to every house, but they knocked at our door. When nobody answered, they broke the window, opened the door, entered and asked, 'Who lives here?' When nobody answered them again, they set fire to somebody's blanket on the bed and it began to burn. I remember my mother was terribly scared. She asked them, 'What do you think you're doing? Can't you see that a child is sleeping here?' I don't remember what happened next because I was very scared. Mother took me to another room. I think the adults gave the bandits some money, and they left and went to another house. In 1918, when mother realized that my father had died and she was left alone, we went to live in Kiev. Mother had to earn her living, and it was impossible to find a job in Rzhishev. I was often ill, maybe due to lack of food. I had huge furuncles all over my body. That is why I went to school only in 1921, a year later than I should have. It was a Russian school. I don't know whether there were any Jewish schools around. At home, mother and grandmother spoke Yiddish. (Back then I understood everything they said, but didn't speak much Yiddish. Now, regrettably, I've forgotten everything.) But then my mother said that I should study only in a Russian school, so that I would later be able to study at a university and find a job. The school I went to was a mixed school, both boys and girls studied there. There were Ukrainian, Russian and Jewish children there. But I don't remember that anyone would offend anybody else for national reasons. Most of our teachers were Russian or Ukrainian, but they treated Jewish children very well; they treated me even in a special, warm way because I was fatherless.