

Raissa Smelaya



This is a picture of me as a student of the 5th grade. I am 12 years old. The photo was taken for my school identity card in Kiev in 1939. I was born in 1927. My name was written as Raissa in my birth certificate, but my Jewish name is Rokhl. I started to study at a Russian secondary school located not far from our house in 1935. There were many Jewish children in my class, but we didn't care a bit about nationality. We were raised in the spirit of internationalism. It happened so that my school friends were Jewish girls. My favorite subjects were literature and mathematics, and I didn't like physics and chemistry at all. I liked poems and collected books. My parents gave me money to buy books. I also borrowed books from libraries or my friends. I knew many poems by heart. I often recited poems at school concerts. From the 3rd grade on we had military training at school. The boys formed two groups representing the armies and pretended to fight battles. They were taught to use weapons, clean and put together rifles and machine guns. These were replica weapons. Girls were medical nurses. We were taught to carry wounded patients on stretches, treat the wounds and apply bandages. In the 4th grade we even stayed in a village for two days. There was a field

kitchen trailer. We made cereals in big bowls on the fireplace. We learned to shoot. We had an automatic rattle gun that was very much like a real gun. We learned to assemble and disassemble weapons and provide first aid to the wounded. There was competition between the various groups. It was very interesting. I was a pioneer at school. We became pioneers in the 4th grade. There was a ceremony on 22nd April, Lenin's birthday. We went to the Lenin Museum where the ceremony was conducted. We were told that capitalists wanted to destroy the power of workers and peasants and that they were our enemies. After classes we patrolled Kreschatik. When we saw a man wearing a hat and decent clothing we understood that he might be a spy. There were articles published in children's newspapers about pioneers that captured a spy and we dreamed that we would get lucky, too. There were many songs about the war at that time. In those songs the Soviet army defeated an enemy in a matter of days. We sang, 'If there is a war tomorrow and if we have to leave our homes tomorrow, if dark forces attack us all, Soviet people will rise as one to fight for their great motherland'. However, we never believed that somebody would dare to attack our country. In June 1941 I finished the 6th grade with all the best marks in my report book. My friends and I were planning to go to the circus on Sunday, 22nd June 1941. Early in the morning we were woken up by the roar of explosions. Our neighbors came to the corridor to find out what had happened. German planes were bombing Kiev already.