

Ella Lukatskaya's Mother Shendel Smertenko



My mother Shendel (Sophia) Smertenko. Photo made in 1920s in Kiev.

They decided to send my mother and two other children to an orphanage to save them from starvation.

This house gave shelter to little boys and girls. They were living separately, and the synagogue acolytes' wives were taking care of them. The children received traditional Jewish education there, but my mother told me she didn't feel quite at home at this place.

My mother went to school at the synagogue and studied three years there. My mother's mother tongue was Yiddish, but my mother knew Hebrew (she could read and write) and she had had an introductory course for Torah. In 1914 she had to terminate her studies, due to WWI. My mother's older brother was recruited to the front and again the family was left without any means of existence. Almost all children, including my mother (she was 10 years old) went to work. My mother went to the garment factory. This was the beginning of my mother's work experience and a turning point in her life. She changed her environment from Jewish to the working proletariat. In 3 years time she developed strong revolutionary and atheist ideas.

My mother believed that the revolution was liberation from poverty and fear for being Jewish. She strongly believed that there would never be any pogroms and that all people would be well off and happy. She was absorbed by the revolution. In the 20s she became one of the first Komsomol members in Kiev. She was a member of the Komsomol unit of Ratmanskiy. He was a famous revolutionary and a Jew. He was killed by a bandit later. My mother switched to Russian when she was 13-14 years old. When she was an apprentice at the factory she was trying to make speeches, and they were in Russian, of course. Since then she spoke Russian. She only spoke Yiddish with her mother Ita until January 1941 when my grandmother died.