

Emma Balonova, Her Sister And Cousin



This photograph shows me, my sister and my cousin. It was taken in 1928 by someone of our relatives.

Having got married, my parents lodged in a small town in Belarus (I've forgotten its name). Soon they moved to Minsk. And I was born on April 17, 1920 in Vitebsk.

Mum did not want to give birth in Minsk, because she was afraid that father would not allow arranging bar mitzvah for the newborn boy (she was sure a boy would be born).

But it was me who was born, and our family remained in peace: I already told you that my father was an atheist.

When he was a child, he used to sing at the synagogue because he had got a good voice, but when he grew up, at the age of 19, he broke with religion and became a communist.

He always told me and my sisters that there was no God. And it went without saying that our family members could arrange no bar mitzvah for newborn boys.

Through habit I go on saying my sisters, but in fact I had only one sister. Now I'll tell you how my second sister appeared in our family.

In 1921 in Samara people starved and suffered from cholera epidemic. Two Mum's sisters lived there, they both died during that epidemic.

One of them left 3 little children; each of them was taken by the families of their uncles and aunts in order to avoid children's home.

That was why Mum's niece lived in our family as mother's sister. But unfortunately 4 children of the other Mum's sister got to a children's home somewhere in Belarus.

From time to time my Mum took them home, and we made good friends. They were always hungry and ragged. Once I even got frightened, when I went out and saw a dirty child in the street (it happened in Minsk).

I came back home and said 'Mum, I am afraid to go out, there is a homeless boy over there.' When that boy came into our court yard, I recognized my cousin David.

Later he appeared to be a very talented person; he graduated from the Leningrad University through a correspondence course and became a school director. Everybody loved him very much.

My younger sister Klara was born in 1923, and my elder cousin sister was born in 1912. Her name was Mirra Goman.

I can't recall very well our apartment in Minsk. For some reason now I can hardly recall our family life. I guess we rented a small house. Our neighbors were Belarusian families.

We all lived in peace and friendship despite different nationalities. I do not remember anybody coming to oblige. Otherwise Mum would have not sent me to the kindergarten. I liked my kindergarten.

The only crumpled rose-leaf was absence of my sister Klara there: she was too little for it. I cried so bitterly that they allowed her to attend my kindergarten with me as a guest.

In Minsk I went to school, and studied there 5 years. We studied Belarusian language and loved that subject very much.

As a result, we spoke it very well, we could read and write in Belarusian language. We were also interested in Belarus literature and knew many poems by heart.

What an odd mixture is human memory! I do not remember the number of rooms in our apartment, but can recall some political events clearly. Probably it was connected with my father's work.

Well, in 1927 two Italian communists Sacco and Vanzetti were executed because they were communists and were in touch with the Soviet government.

[Nikola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italians by birth were workers and revolutionaries in the USA.

In 1920 they were charged in murder, brought in a verdict of guilty and sentenced to death penalty.] In Minsk there took place a great manifestation of protest against that execution.

I remember the large square in the central district of Minsk. It was overcrowded with people carrying banners and slogans.

Leaders of the city mounted the rostrum, and my father was among them. He even made a speech. And he took me (what a mercy!) with him to the rostrum. It was impossible to be forgotten!

My elder sister was a very active member of the Komsomol organization. At the Officers' House there was a local Komsomol organization. Its members arranged different recreational events: dancing, choral singing, theater performances.

Sometimes my sister took me there, and I enjoyed it very much. In summer my elder sister used to work in pioneer camps as a pioneer leader. [Pioneer camps were out-of-town establishments for children - members of the Pioneer Organization.]

She always took me with her. But mum never allowed my younger sister to go with us, because her health was very poor: at the slightest provocation she immediately fell sick.