

Emma Balonova's Classmates



This photograph was taken in Gomel in 1938. It shows my classmates when we were pupils of the last form.

Unfortunately the photo is of bad quality, therefore it is difficult to recognise my friends.

In 1932 when I was 12 we moved to Gomel. At that time my younger sister was 9 years old, and my elder sister was already 20.

She entered a technical school. [Technical schools appeared in the USSR to prepare employees of middle level for industrial, agricultural and other organizations.]

In spite of the fact that Daddy was a Communist Party worker, we lived in a communal apartment. At that time party workers had no privileges in compare with benefits which appeared later on.

We lived in a four-room apartment: 2 rooms were occupied by us, 2 rooms - by our neighbor. Our rooms were very large; we also had a vast balcony. The apartment was very good. There was central heating, but we heated our bathroom with firewood.

I remember Daddy chopping firewood. It is interesting that in our apartment there was a big Russian stove. Mum always made very tasty pies, because Russian stove was very good for baking.

Mum did everything about the house and my elder sister helped her. My younger sister and I never assisted them. When I was a child I washed not a single handkerchief myself.

Parents told us that we had to study, and that was all. The only assistant to Mum was a laundress, who came to us once a week: she used to work all day long.

Our neighbor sang fairly well: she appeared in concert halls with Jewish songs. I also sang delightfully, therefore she started teaching me to sing Jewish songs. And I knew the language, because I lived in a Jewish city.

In Gomel we lived in one of the central streets in a big house. In Gomel there lived many Jews. There were no special Jewish zones of residence: one could hear people speaking Yiddish all over the city.

I do not remember any manifestations of anti-Semitism, I do not remember anybody talking about nationalities. The same was at my school: we never discussed it.

We chose friends following different preferences, but we never thought about nationality. One day when we were already adult, we tried to recollect who of our classmates was Jewish, but did not manage.

I remember the synagogue in Gomel, but nobody of our acquaintances visited it. The synagogue building was a big, uncared-for, painted dark grey. I never got in.

Besides the secondary school, I attended a musical one. Therefore I could not spend all my time with my friends though I wished to: all my school friends did their homework and were able to do anything they wanted till the next day.

As for me, every evening I had to go to my musical school. But on holidays and days off we visited each other at home, listened to music. All my friends (especially when they grew up) liked to discuss political topics with my Daddy.

Daddy used to deliver public lectures on international situation. A great number of people gathered to listen to him; his speech used to come across very well. By the way, my father could speak Yiddish, Russian and Belarusian languages very well.

All of us liked our form-master (a teacher of chemistry) very much. Her name was Nina Fominichna Guseva. She was very strict, but very good.

Half of our class became enthusiastic about chemistry and entered chemical colleges (and I was one of them). Here you see what a large part a teacher can play in the life of their pupils!