

Irina Lopko



This is me when I was 20 years old. This photo was made in Kiev in 1952.

I finished school in 1950. There was a very good Pedagogical College in Moscow. One day my parents came home and I said: 'I've submitted my documents to the Pedagogical College'. They were so happy. I passed all exams with '5' marks and was admitted. My specialty was Russian philology. I had problems with the Ukrainian language, but I studied it with such effort that before graduation I knew it perfectly.

In the early 1950s I studied in college. Since I had all excellent marks. The drama called 'doctors' plot' was played in the country. Wonderful doctors who worked with us in the hospital didn't have patients any more. There was doctor Khizes. There were rumors in town that he instilled some throat diseases in his patients. I hate those memories of this horror and all those terrible articles in newspapers.

There were few Jewish lecturers and students in our college. They pestered us at Komsomol meetings for little things. There were village wenches and demobilized military in their uniform coats and they couldn't forgive us for our successful studies and intelligence when they were dumb and uneducated. However, there were nice Ukrainian and Russian girls and teachers, but there were so few of them. I am sure that anti-Semitism is based on jealousy. I remember two senior Jewish students: Bishler and Braier. They were two years senior. They were intelligent and talented guys. They were criticized at every meeting. Once I spoke in their defense.

Later they said that these 'zhydy' [kikes] were all the same. I was the best student. I liked studying and everything was interesting for me, including the Russian and Ukrainian languages and

literature and there was nothing to reproach me with.

However, I was naive like everybody else and I believed in justice. When Stalin died in 1953 I thought I was going to die too. Life seemed to have stopped. Some time later talks about doctors came to an end.

When I was a student I became interested in the Jewish subject and began to make a log of outstanding Jewish people. I consulted assistant professor Polonski, a Jew. Then I became obsessed with it. My acquaintances always called me when they wanted to find out information about Jews. Everybody knew that Irina knew everything about all Jews. I didn't keep it a secret that I collected information about Jews, but only Jews took interest in it.

I got married in 1953. I met my future husband at a Komsomol conference in Chernigov [200 km from Kiev]. His name was Boris Lopko. We registered our marriage in a registry office in Chernigov. After graduation I taught the Russian language in a school in Nezhin for two years. On days off I traveled 90 km to my husband in Chernigov by bus. Boris worked as an electrician. Later I convinced him to enter extramural department of Polytechnic College in Chernigov. I helped him with his studies and did tests for him. When he received his diploma he said 'I can give you this diploma. It's yours', but I said 'Thanks, I already have one'. It was hard for us to be together. We were different people. He got irritated at my attachment to books and my inclination for going into the depth of things. During the period of anti-Semitism his instincts told him that it was better to conceal that he was a Jew and he never objected when somebody spoke against Jews. I was different and the first thing I said when meeting people was that I was a Jew.

There was a vacancy in a children's library in Chernigov and I appealed for it. I wanted to be with my husband in Chernigov. I worked in the reading hall first and later I became director of this library when my predecessor retired. I had to be on guard all the time: if a writer got arrested and there were articles in central newspapers we had to remove his books from our stocks. I had to enter the Party to keep this position and I did. It was a formal and routinely ceremony.

At first we lived with my husband's relatives in Chernigov. Later we rented an apartment. When our baby was due my husband worked as an engineer and received a nice room in a communal apartment in the center of the town. Our son was born in 1957. We named him Fyodor.