

Grigoriy Stel'makh In The Kindergarten



I, Grigoriy Stel'makh, in evacuation in Shantala, in the kindergarten, the fifth from the left in the first row. This photo was taken on the New Year celebration in 1943. This was my first New Year that I remembered and I've never forgotten it. Our tutors, who wanted to warm up our hearts during the hard years of the war, organized this party for us.

I, Grigoriy Stel'makh, was born in Chernobyl town of the Kiev region on 18 July 1939. I was named after my great grandfather, my grandmother's father Ronia Gershl. Some time later our family moved to Kiev where they received half a house in the distant outskirt of Stalinka [it's one of the central districts of the city now].

We evacuated in the middle of July 1941. I don't remember any details of our trip. We arrived at the Shantala railway station. From there, from Shantala, my childhood memory took its beginning. This was a station lost in the woods, somewhere at the distance of 200 km from Ulianovsk in the depths of Russia. My mother went to work in a hospital. Our Russian landlady Manya was very kind. There were six of us: my mother, my two sisters and I, my grandmother and my mother's sister Frania. We had one room in a wooden house. We, kids, slept in bed with my grandmother and my mother and her sister slept on the floor. It's hard to say anything about food: I didn't remember anything else. Everything my grandmother made tasted delicious: pancakes with some herb, soup with unknown ingredients or pies. My grandmother was very handy with making a meal from 'nothing' and other women came to learn from her. My grandmother tried to observe Jewish traditions. She boiled few casseroles to make kosher utensils. I was told that there were sweets, ice-cream, candy and oranges in life, but I took it easy like any child since I didn't know anything about them. By that time I knew that we lived in the big town of Kiev with big buildings, cars, beautiful streets and parks, and that the capital of our Motherland was Moscow and the main man lived in the Kremlin. My mother told me all this. I went to kindergarten. I remember a New Year party with Santa Claus, i.e., they were trying to create some living conditions for us and I am grateful to these people. I was small and didn't know what was better and what was worse, but now

I recall this with warm feelings.

Sometimes we went to see mother in hospital. She secretly brought us a cup of kissel (fruit jelly) to the front door: and this was such delicacy. Patients liked us. They put me on their lap and gave me sugarplums: those were the first sweets in my life, and they stroked my hair. I didn't understand that they were missing their children.

Finally in 1943 Kiev was liberated and we went home. We arrived in Kiev in winter. I was struck to see the destitution and ruins in Kiev. There were other tenants in our apartment. Our neighbors took our furniture, carpets, and the piano and crystal crockery. We didn't have a place to live and we went to my mother's aunt Dvoira Brodskaya. Life was hard. There was little food and I had to stand in long lines for bread sold by coupons. I also remember delicacies: American canned meat and egg powder that my father sent us occasionally. I went to school in 1946 and we wrote on newspaper sheet margins since there were no notebooks or textbooks.