

## Vera Sonina's Sister



This photograph was taken in 1937 in Kondopoga (Karelia). It shows my sister Annette. When I came to visit her there, I persuaded her to go to a photo studio and have her picture taken.

Now I'll tell you about my sisters. My elder sister was Alexandra, everyone called her Shura. Her Jewish name was Sara-Rose. She was born in 1908 in Zaporozhye. She had a magnificent mop of fair hair. Shura was a hysterical girl. She sometimes beat us until she stopped with pain in her hands. And then she embraced us and started wailing 'Oh you, our poor orphans!' She studied at the evening faculty of some economic college. I do not remember where she worked after graduation from her College. She died during the siege of Leningrad. My brother-in-law, Zhenóá's husband was at the Leningrad front and saw Shura shortly before her death. All my life I felt unhappy about the fact that Shura died, thinking that I was not alive. You see, I was in Kishinev, when the war burst out and had no connection with my relatives during a long period of time. Shura was never married.

My next sister was Slava, her Jewish name was Sliva. She was born in 1910 in Zaporozhye. She died of brain cancer. I guess it happened in 1960s. She was operated, but after the operation she managed to live not long. She wanted to become an electrical engineer, but right at that time Stalin said that our country needed textile-workers. And she entered a Textile College. I never saw such wonderful smile as of hers. In compare with Shura, her character was different. I can judge by punishments she imposed upon us: no shouts, no hysterics, one strong spat on the face and the punished girl was sent into a dark corridor. I was so much afraid of it that felt spasms thinking about it. Above all I was afraid of darkness. Slava had a husband. I hated him. His name was Boris

Leytes. He was from Smolensk by origin. He did not manage to join our family: Mum felt embarrassed and never came out of her room when he visited us. It seems to me that Slava did not love him. She married him because she felt shy with strangers because of scars on her leg (after operation). I guess she married the first person who asked her. Their daughter Rita lives in Israel now. I do not remember when she was born. Rita has got 2 children: a daughter and a son.

My third sister was Eugenia (Zhenya), her Jewish name was Genye. She was born in 1912. She got married very early and gave birth to a daughter Bela. I can not recollect what her profession was. Her husband was a very good person; we all loved him very much. Until now I call him in mind and cry bitter tears. His name was Vladimir Alexandrovich Lebedev. He was a professional military. He lived near to us. After marriage Zhenya moved there. I helped them a lot after their daughter was born: I spent nights at them and awakened Zhenya who had to breast-feed her child, but could never wake up in time. Zhenya died recently (in 2000).

My fourth sister, my favorite sister and friend was Annette, a blue-eyed angel. Her Jewish name was Dane-Ite. She was born in 1916. When Shura beat us, I shouted twice more for both myself and Annette: she never let out a cry, only shed large tears. I cried 'Do not dare to beat my Annette, beat me.' When I recollect it, my life seems to me a mixture of Sholom-Aleichem and Dostoevsky. Annette did not manage to enter a college, she finished Hydrological Technical School. She was assigned to work in Karelia, in Kondopoga. There she married Tochilin, a chief engineer. He was ill with pulmonary tuberculosis. Annette got infection from him and came back to Leningrad to die. Here she died on my hands. It happened in 1946. There was no person closer to me than her. Until her death she was extremely afraid to infect me: she did not permit anybody to use her tableware. She also tried to serve herself till her last days.

And the fifth sister, the last one called by the members of our family 'a little finger', was me - Vera. My Jewish name was Dobe-Dveyre.

I already told you that my elder sisters lived hard life. Our Mum did not manage to master housekeeping in the inhuman atmosphere we lived in. She was able to cook, but she needed good products, and we had almost nothing. She said 'I'm not able to cook your broth.' Sisters cooked, washed, and sewed, or rather repaired old clothes.