

Vera Sonina Among Students



This photograph was taken in Leningrad in 1937. It shows students of my College group. We met and one of us had a camera with him. I have no photographs of my childhood, but I'd like to tell you some words about that time.

At the age of 8 I went to school. But soon that school was closed (I do not remember the reason). I found a new school on my own; it was situated far away, but in a very beautiful building. I had to cross 3 busy streets, including one with a tram-line. Nobody took into his head the idea to accompany me there: I was so independent that it was beyond my endurance. One day on my way to school I stopped feasting my eyes upon a beautiful ancient church. I came to myself only when the tram driver jumped out of his cabin and tried to pull me down from tram-line tweaking my ears. He used bad language, and I asked him 'Guv, do you think that baron Munhgauzen hung himself on this bell tower?' [Baron Munhgauzen is a hero of Adventures of Baron Munhgauzen novel by E. Raspe.] His answer was a little bit unexpected 'All barons were shot down during the Revolution.'

At school I made many friends: I was a very sociable girl. At school we did not care who of us was Jewish and who not. But in our court yard everything was different. Once Maruska, a neighbor (a little girl of my age) heard me singing a romance Cornflowers, Cornflowers. [Cornflowers, Cornflowers was a popular petty-bourgeois romance in the middle of the 19th century.]

She shouted 'Cornflowers, Cornflowers - and you are a dirty Jew!' I heard this word for the first time in my life; I was surprised and answered 'You are wrong, I am Sonina.' I went home to ask my Mum about that new surname. Mum said that she would explain the details later, when I grew older. She

also said that there were different nationalities and that noses like mine were typical only for Jews, but it was not a shame. Mum advised me to say Maruska that she behaved like a swine. For my mild Mum that word was the most abusive she could ever say. After that when we were playing lapta, Maruska was jealous of my adroitness and I recalled that I was Jewish. According to my Mum's advice I said 'The dirty Jew catches ball very well, and the swine is not able to do it.'

In our house there lived good people: for instance, Semen Fomich and his wife Nastya. He was a person of remarkable kindness and selflessness. During blockade he made runners and fixed a huge container on them. All inhabitants of our house used it to carry water from the Neva River. He did not survive the blockade, but his wife Nastya came through it.

When I was in the fourth form, I changed my school for another one which was nearer to our house. My friend and neighbor Raya was my classmate. She always had her lunch with her, and she was generous enough to share it with me. I was the poorest in our class and never accepted anything from anybody, but for some reason I took Raya's food easily.

They say 'Childhood, childhood, our happy childhood.' But you know I do not want to return to my childhood. Do you remember Sholom-Aleichem's 'Well, what for has God created bugs?' I remember my elder sisters struggling against bugs in our beds and lice in our hair! Until now I recollect with horror the moment when a pupil on duty at our school said to our teacher in presence of my classmates 'And Sonina has lice.' Poverty and starvation are always accompanied by lice. Every evening Mum said 'Children, let me look at your heads.' She started combing insects out from our hair by means of fine-tooth comb. No, I do not want that sort of childhood!