

Evgenia Gendler



I, at the age of 13. This photo was taken in Novosokolniki in 1939. I was born in 1926 and named Zelda at birth. I was born in Novosokolniki, a district town in Kalinin region in Russia, in about 500 km to the south of Leningrad [520 km to the west from Moscow]. We were poor. My father was the only breadwinner. My mother was a housewife. My father earned little money. My father also worked home in the evening to earn some additional money. He was a roofer and tinsmith. I remember our small wooden house. There was a plot of land near the house. There was a cellar and a shed in the backyard where we kept a cow, geese and chickens. There was a big vegetable garden near the house. I helped my mother work in it. We grew potatoes, tomatoes and cabbage. It was a big support for the family. My father had religious books in Hebrew that he read. My parents

didn't buy fiction books. Our parents spoke Yiddish at home. My sisters and I spoke Yiddish with our parents and Russian between us. We celebrated Jewish holiday at home. I went to school at the age of 8. This was a Russian secondary school where my sisters studied, too. Our teacher called the roll at our first lesson and I said that my name was Zelda. The teacher said there was not such a name. Since then I was to be called Zenia - an affectionate form of Evgenia. I got used to be called by this name, though I have the name Evgenia written in my passport. I studied well at school. I was fond of literature and history. I had all good marks. Our teachers liked me. I was a sociable girl. I became a pioneer in the 4th form and sincerely thought it was a great honor. In 1938 the life of our family changed dramatically. My father had an accident at work. He fell from the roof he was working on and injured his lung. Since there was no hospital in Novosokolniki my father was taken to hospital in the neighboring town of Velikie Luki. He developed pneumonia and died in the hospital. He was 42 years old. We had nothing to live on after our father died. We often had nothing to eat. I was the youngest and the weakest in the family. I got ill often and missed school. Whenever my mother could afford it she bought milk for me from our Jewish neighbor Chava, but this happened rarely.