

Minna Birman And Her Brother Ilia Birman



This is me, Minna Birman, and my brother Ilia Birman. This photo was taken in Odessa in 1930. Little Ilia removed this photograph from its frame and painted stars on our foreheads for everybody to know that we were the children of communists.

I was born in Yelisavetgrad [Kirovograd from 1924] on 2 January 1923. In early 1924 my parents came to Odessa. On 19 February 1927 my brother Ilia was born in Odessa. We lived in 12, Lenin Street then. My mother was ill after childbirth and the baby screamed all the time. I remember coming to his bed and dumping all my toys into his bed: it was a doll crockery tin set. My parents talked me off since I scratched the baby. Ilia's birth was a trauma for me. I believed he was loved more.

In 1930 I went to school. People's commissar [minister] of education issued an order to switch to the Ukrainian language of teaching at schools. There was one Russian school left in each district of Odessa. For some reason my parents sent me to Ukrainian school #4 on the corner of Troitskaya and Preobrazhenskaya Streets. I was a miserable pupil since I didn't know Ukrainian. My Ukrainian teacher used to say 'Is this a girl? This is a boy and isn't he a bad one!' considering my short haircut and bad marks. Once my teacher told me to tell my mother to come to school for a talk. My mother was so busy that I decided to tell her nothing. Instead, I stopped going to school. I left home in the morning and went to walk along Alexandrovski Prospect where I played with cobbles. Then I went to Troitskaya Street and waited until schoolchildren began to leave school and I went home. This lasted for a month and a half.

My friends from our yard studied in Russian school #25, in Bariatinski Lane (present Nakhimov Lane). My friend Nadia Shyriaeva tried to pull strings for my transfer to her school. Her teacher Maria Isaakovna said it was not possible. The port was sponsoring his Russian school and children had their school parties in the port club. Nadia invited me once to a party. The entrance to this club was on the first floor from Lastochkin descend and exit from the concert hall was from the second floor down a very narrow staircase. When we were going in somebody yelled 'Fire!' and everybody ran to the exit door. Only noticed the beginning of panic and when I came back to my senses I saw Nadia standing over me crying and Maria Isaakovna standing beside her. When Maria Isaakovna saw me opening my eyes she sighed with relief 'Hey, she is alive!' I had a hemorrhage in my eye. After this happened Maria Isaakovna felt sorry for me and convinced my mother to send me to school #25.

My mother and father were so different: she was noisy and had a loud voice, she could even slap us if she was in this kind of mood. My father was quiet her opposite: he never raised his voice and spoke quietly and was against physical punishment of the children. My parents hardly spent time with us. My mother worked in the trade department of the town Party committee and didn't have time for her children. I came from school and my brother came from his kindergarten and we played in the yard until my father came home from work. My mother came home at six o'clock. By this time we had to be at home and have our hands washed. The family got together for dinner and our housemaid was at the table with us. After dinner my mother went back to work and stayed there until nine o'clock. My father often left home in the evening. He spent time at the association of political convicts and was involved in social activities. My mother was strict about the family order: the children were not allowed to talk about any talks or happenings at home. I remember my mother once punishing my brother with a belt for blurting something out in the yard that my father was grabbing her hands screaming 'Sophia, you will kill him!'