

Balbina Cohn (or Kon)



This is a studio portrait of my mother, Balbina Cohn or Kon (nee Lewin). It was probably taken in Warsaw, shortly after World War II.

My mother was born in 1898. Her unique name was the product of somebody's imagination. My mother was always a little ashamed of her name. She blamed her father for that. She asked why he'd given her such a silly name. He joked: 'Well, I asked you but you didn't say it was a bad name.'

I don't know any stories about my parents' childhoods. My mother went to a Russian gymnasium, I think. That's why she spoke Russian very well. She studied chemistry at Warsaw University, but she didn't finish, but my father, who studied at the Warsaw Polytechnic, did finish. I think my mother attended all her classes but she didn't get her certificate. I think she and my father met during their studies.

My parents got married in a synagogue. That was an exception, in a sense. They weren't religious at all; they weren't even believers. Perhaps someone wanted it, it was somebody's wish - I can't say why it happened. But that has stuck in my mind. I remember that it was something of a curiosity in my parents' circles. Once, a friend of my father's came to Warsaw, and I remember that when he met my mother, he said, 'This is the beautiful Bela who got married in a synagogue!'

My parents weren't poor. They weren't as rich as Croesus, but they lived plentifully. I'm not from rich circles, but people were wealthy, as you could see from their apartments, from everything. My father worked, and my mother probably inherited something from her father, who was the co-proprietor of a firm. All in all it was a relatively good life.