

Fira Usatinskaya With Her Mother And Brother



This is a picture of me, my mother Freida Usatinskaya (nee Pivchik) and my brother Srul Usatinskiy. The photo was taken at Elovaysk station in summer 1937 during our vacation at the Azov Sea.

I was born in Ilintsy on 12th February 1924. I was named after my grandmother. My brother Srul, named after our grandfather, was born in 1926. My parents were very poor. They rented an apartment. I don't remember anything about Ilintsy. My mother told me that it was a typical small town with the majority of the population being Jewish. There was a market and a synagogue in the center and all residents knew everything about each other's life.

At the end of summer 1932 my father came to take us to Makeevka, where he and my brother had found jobs. We were still very poor. My father went to work as a janitor at the bakery and that saved us during the famine in 1933. My father brought us loaves of bread that had fallen apart. I don't know whether this bread really fell apart or if he helped out a little there, but in any case this bread saved us. We always looked forward to my father coming home from work and putting gray glutinous bread on the table. My mother gave equal pieces to my older brother and sister, Srul and me. My father didn't eat any bread at home, telling us that he had had enough at work. My mother ate a very small piece.

In Makeevka I went to a Russian secondary school. There were mostly Jewish families in the building where we lived. My brother Srul and I had many friends. I also had Ukrainian and Russian school friends since there were children of various nationalities in our school. Our teachers treated us nicely and there was no segregation at school. The children were different though. There was a group of pupils that called Jews 'zhydy' [kike]. Once they even caught my brother and me after classes and applied pork fat on our lips teasing us that we didn't eat pork. I can say that I have identified myself as a Jew since my childhood.

I became a Young Octobrist and then a pioneer and Komsomol member at school. I took an active part in all activities: sang in the choir and attended dance and drama clubs. I also played checkers and chess. I liked studying at school, even though I wasn't the best pupil. I was good at German and my teacher often asked me to help other children with the German language. We celebrated all Soviet holidays at school and attended parades on 1st May and 7th November, October Revolution Day. On holidays my friends and I went for walks in the park and to the cinema or cultural center in the evening.

We didn't celebrate Soviet holidays at home. My parents went to the synagogue and celebrated Jewish holidays. They understood that my brother and I had other interests and didn't impose their outlooks on us. I regret that I didn't learn my mother tongue and Jewish traditions and customs, but when I was young I thought these to be a vestige of the past. I didn't care about nationality and just differentiated between good and evil people. I still do.