

Chasia Spanerflug



This is me, Chasia Spanerflug. This is a copy of my school picture taken in 1936 in Vilnius.

In 1932 I finished the Tarbut school. In the summer of 1933 I came to Vilnius and entered the Hebrew lyceum Tarbut, named after its first headmaster, founder and sponsor Doctor Epstein. It was located on Pilimo Street, 4. It was the most prestigious Jewish educational institution in Vilnius. Here children of rich merchants, manufacturers, lawyers and doctors studied. The tuition was rather high for that time: 15 zloty per month. Our family couldn't afford that. My uncle Solomon covered my tuition. He sent money to Aunt Miriam and she brought it to us.

I didn't have a place to stay. My aunts and uncle lived in Vilnius but they didn't have a room for me. One of them had only two rooms; the other one had five, but there was a study, bedroom,

drawing room and they could put me only in the hall. Until now I am astounded by the kindness of strangers and callousness of my kin. My mother came to Vilnius and rented a room for me from some strangers. At first, I was crying a lot, feeling homesick and missing my parents. Then I was immersed in my studies, made friends and got used to it somehow. Usually in October I went home on Jewish holidays, then came back to Vilnius, and in December I was home again for Chanukkah.

My life in Vilnius was rather hard. I dined with one Jewish lady for 30 kopecks a day. As a rule I couldn't get along with landladies. Decent and kind women were rare. Mother often sent me parcels with provisions: butter and cheese, freshly-baked bread, chicken, meat, about 60 eggs. Once I lived at the place of a Jewish lady called Molchanskaya, who deliberately ate all my products with her daughter and then she said that I had nothing to eat. Then I, choking with tears, went to the bakery, where people knew me, felt sympathetic and gave me bread for free. I was undernourished, I went to bed hungry.

Generally, children of wealthy people went to my lyceum and I took a split roll with me to conceal my poverty and to show that there was something in it, thought at times there wasn't even butter inside the roll. Children who knew about my poverty treated me very well. When the class was going on an excursion which wasn't free of charge, one of the rich children paid for me so I could go with everybody. They didn't do it to show off, but stealthily, for me even not to know about it.

I had friends. My bosom friend was Mikhail Brantsovskiy. He was my classmate. His parents were wealthy people – Mikhail's father was involved in manufacturing. I was friends with Mikhail's cousin, Chaya Kushnir, who came from the province and lived in Brantsovskiy's house. Mikhail's mother, Dina Brantsovskaya, was a very kind woman. Her house was always open for her son's friends. There were times when a large company of friends came to Mikhail's and stayed in the house until late. I often went there by myself. Aunt Dina always made sure that I was fed. She understood that I was undernourished. Sometimes I stayed overnight, not to walk around in the street at a late hour.

Masha Nemze was also my friend. Her parents owned a large fur store in the heart of the city. They had a dacha and they invited me to come over there for a couple of weeks during vacation. On Jewish holidays, the lyceum was closed and I went to my home town. I spent summer holidays at home as well. I didn't want to go home as I was afraid of my parents' tiffs, which became more frequent with the years. But still, I loved my town, my school friends and I enjoyed spending time with them. Mother took good care of me to make up for the time of my being alone in a big city. She bought fabric on credit and ordered me new dresses, for me not to look worse than my rich classmates. In summer I was sometimes sent to Grandfather in Novoyelnya. Grandfather Velvl was very sick. Now he lived on the money sent by his children. They treated him really well and sent him all kinds of sweets, honey and dried fruits apart from money. He enjoyed all that very much. When I came over, Grandfather opened up his cherished chest and treated me to sweet things.