

Frida Muchnik With Her School Friends



This is me sitting first from the right, with my school friends. The girl from the left wearing a colorful dress is Zina Fihrer, she lives in Israel. The one in the center, she has a white collar, is Klara, she also lives in Israel, standing on the right is my friend Polia, she lives in America. These girls were in the ghetto in Bershad and survived. This photo was taken in Bershad in 1946, when we were in the 10th form.

I was born in 1926. I was a long-awaited and beloved baby. I was born during Rosh Hashanah and mother said this was a sign that I should be happy. They registered my birth in December 1926. I was named after my grandmother: in the synagogue they wrote my name as Frima, and in my birth certificate my name is Frida.

In 1934 I went to school. I went to the 'zero' preparatory class, but since I was doing very well there, they took me to the first form. Our family spoke mostly Yiddish and this was the language of my childhood. Our family also spoke fluent Ukrainian and so did I. I studied well and even finished the 5th and the 6th forms with honors. In the 7th form, however, I lost some interest in further studies. I wanted to become a pharmacist. There was a school in town, but mama told me she was not going to let me leave home. I knew there was no place to study after school in our town and this had an impact on my study at school. I received '3's [out of 5] at school and mama looked at me with reproach, when she returned from parents' meetings at school, but she never told me off. I do not remember any of our household raising their voices at me. At one time I was thinking of becoming a teacher, but this did not last long: I didn't like it that schoolchildren teased teachers and gave them funny nicknames. Also, like all other girls, I dreamed of becoming an actress. There was a big new club in Bershad where theatrical groups came on tours. My father brought tickets from his work. Mama and I dressed up and went to their performances. These were amateur and professional Jewish theaters for the most part.

I had many friends, they were mostly Jewish girls - my schoolmates. I became a pioneer, and I liked wearing a red neck tie. I liked Soviet holidays: 1 May, October revolution Day, when there were parades in our town. I went to parades with my school, and asked my mother to make me a new outfit for every parade. I wore a Ukrainian folk outfit one time, an embroidered blouse and a coral necklace, or a kossack costume another time. There were concerts in the club in the evenings. At one time I recited poems in these amateur concerts. Our favorite pastime was going to the cinema. In the late 1930s we got a radio at home and I listened to brave and optimistic Soviet songs.

Our family got to know that the Great Patriotic War began from the Molotov speech that the whole country listened to on 22 June 1941 at noon. On 22 July 1941 Germans dropped the first bombs on our little town. This was the beginning of the most crucial time in my life that I've tried to forget in all years after the war. It's hard for me to recall the occupation, reopening the old wounds in my heart. When fascists came into the town, they gathered all Jews in the ghetto that occupied the central part of the town. Our house was beyond the boundaries of the ghetto and we had to leave it. We moved into the house of a Jewish family that had evacuated from the town. The ghetto was fenced with a barbed wire and there were policemen guards at the gate. The inmates were not allowed to leave the ghetto. Bershadt belonged to the so-called Transnistria zone that was annexed to Romania. The Romanian occupants replaced the German troops. It is true that the Romanians did not conduct actions aimed at the extermination of Jews, but we lived under the constant threat of death from hunger, infectious diseases, and hits of drunken Romanian policemen with their batons. Our lives were within a hair's breadth from death. The girls of my age were abused in a beastly manner, and my mother decided I should stay in hiding from the very beginning. It's hard to imagine that I stayed in shelters for two and a half years: in the basement, in the attic or in the shed, when fascists or policemen searched the houses. My parents managed to hide me so that I didn't go to work one day through this period. Girls were taken to wash floors in the commandant office and hospital, wash blood-stained bandages, they were beaten and abused. Mama rescued me from this. She gave money to representatives of the Jewish counsel Judenrat, established in the ghetto and responsible for supplying workforce to the occupants, when they came to the house searching for me, or she just kept me in a shelter. Mama was also our breadwinner. She bribed policemen to get out of the ghetto where she could always find some Ukrainian friends willing to help us. Mama gave them money or things, or worked for them and they gave her potatoes, bread, beans that mama brought to the ghetto. At least, I did not starve, and mama and papa pretended they had enough food: for them the most important thing as to provide sufficient food for me. I hardly ever left the house or met with my friends, whose parents also kept them in hiding. In the middle of March 1944 the Soviet army liberated us. I got out of the basement: I could not believe that the horrific years of occupation were over.

Our house was gone: people took it apart for wood. We rented a small room in a basement. I went back to school and finished the 8th and the 9th forms. Then I had to go to work to help my parents. The thing is, in the postwar years education in senior school was not free: they charged 150 rubles per year. I still studied in the 10th form, when I became an apprentice in the bank where my cousin sister worked as a cashier. Director of the school did not know I was working. After finishing school I entered an extramural Bank Technical school in Vinnitsa. I worked diligently and was a smart employee.