

Sophia Stelmakher With Her Cousin Sophia Bekker



This is a picture of me and my cousin Sophia Bekker, the daughter of my mother's younger sister Polina. We were both called Sarah in Yiddish. It's signed on the back with the words, "To Sarah Senior (3.5 years old) from Sarah Junior (3 years old)". The photo was taken in Rybnitsa in 1939. I was born on 29th December 1935. I was named Sophia and given the Jewish name Sarah. My cousin, Polina's daughter, was born in the summer of 1936; I didn't know her father. She was given the same name, Sophia. I don't know why we were named after our grandmother who was alive - it

was against the Jewish tradition. I never knew my father. When I was a child I never gave it a thought why my last name was Bekker, the last name of my grandfather. When I was a child my mother told me that my father was working in the Far North and after the war she said that he had perished. I wasn't surprised, since there were many fatherless children after the war. Only when I had a son at the end of the 1950s my mother told me the truth about my father, though she never disclosed his name. She was probably afraid that I would want to find him and didn't want it to happen. Before I turned one year old my grandmother and Polina took care of me. My mother only came to feed me at intervals. At one I went to a nursery school. I can remember back as far as when I was three. I was in kindergarten. I was a sociable girl and had many friends. I don't know whether there were Jewish children at kindergarten. There were children of other teachers. We were raised to be patriotic. We learned poems about Lenin and Stalin and sang songs. I remember a song 'Thank you, our dear country, for our happy childhood!' My mother picked me up from kindergarten in the evening and put me to bed at home. My mother's sister Polina and her daughter always lived with us. They had their beds in the opposite corner of the room. There was a desk by the window and a kitchen table near the door with a Primus stove on it where my mother did her cooking. We were always pressed for money and my mother cooked simple and inexpensive food: soup, cereal, boiled or fried potatoes. It wasn't really Jewish food. We rarely had meat.