

Mikhail Leger



This is me, Mikhail Leger, I've turned 3. On my birthday my parents took me to the photographer to have a photo of me taken for the family album. This photo was taken in Mogilyov-Podolskiy in 1938.

I was born in 1935 in Mogilyov-Podolskiy. Mama had to go to work and left me in my grandma's care or occasionally she took me to my papa's sister Genia, whose daughter was the same age with me. At 4 I went to the kindergarten near our house. My cousin Lidia Goldman, my father's sister Genia Goldman's daughter, also went to this kindergarten. Though Genia was a housewife, she still sent her daughter to the kindergarten: at that time children were customarily sent to nursery schools to adapt to communication with other children. I was to go to school in 1942.

I remember well the bright and sunny day on 22 June 1941. I remember my parents and mama's brother Faivish, who came to see us in the morning, standing with tense faces by the black plate of the radio listening to something. Then my mother started crying and told me that the war began. It didn't mean much to me. All I knew about the war was how we, boys, played the war. I went outside and heard the roar of the planes flying over the Dnestr from Bessarabia. The beginning of the war is associated for me with those planes flying in rows. There were so many planes that they almost covered the sky, and this looked scaring.

In July 1941 Germans established a Jewish ghetto in the center of the town. It was surrounded with a high stone fence with barbed wire on top of it. The gate was guarded by Romanians. Mama believed I had to study and taught me to read, write and count. Many Jews deported from Romania and Moldavia knew German. Mama hired a school teacher from Bucharest to teach me German. I

managed to learn the curriculum of almost 2 years of school in the ghetto.

There was no radio or newspapers in the ghetto. When adults got together, all they talked about was that we would be exterminated soon and the ghetto will be liquidated. This was terrible. I was just a child, but I can still remember the feeling of horror and despair that overwhelmed me, when they spoke in this manner. All inmates of the ghetto had this expectation of the end despite their age. Adults and children were sort of living our last days. Hungry and cold during a day, we waited for them to come and capture us at night... Every day and every night could be the last in life.

In March 1943 this expectation of the end was particularly acute. At dawn on 19 March we heard explosions. Then it became quiet. We stayed inside till we heard the Russian language. Mama went out and called us right away. We could see the rest of the town from the hill our house was on. We saw 3 Soviet tanks coming into the town. They stopped and the tank men showed up. People were coming closer to hug and thank them. They opened their field kitchen and cooked cereals with tinned meat. It had a magic and long-forgotten taste. We felt so happy. We knew that the war not over yet, but we were free.