

Jan Sokal's Sisters Minka And Gienia



These are my two sisters: Minka, Mina Sokal and Gienia, Eugenia Bilan. The photo was taken in 1930, in Przemysl. Some photographer took it.

We were four brothers and four sisters. A typical Jewish, large, numerous family. Exactly as God told: 'Procreate and give birth.' We kept very close together. These memories of those young family years are still alive in me. Maybe it's my weakness.

The oldest one at home was probably my sister. Her name was Andzia, from Anda. But she died when she was 21 years old. I don't even remember her, very foggy. She died of meningitis. The oldest brother's name was Abraham. He was born in 1905. He was a wise man. Abraham practically directed upbringing at home. He infected us with opinions that the whole family well accepted. Leftist opinions. He probably died tragically. I don't know the details of his death. I don't have specific information and I will never have it in my life. The next one was another sister, who also died in her youth. I cannot even recall her name. Then there was another brother, Bernard. He was a gymnasium student. I don't know if he completed the gymnasium, but he was an educated druggist. Not a pharmacist but a druggist. He used to sell hygienic articles in a drugstore. The story of his life was also very complicated, right. He was sent to prison because of his opinions, because of his activity. It was such radically leftist activity. He was severely punished, right, eight years in prison. He didn't survive the war. He didn't even return home. He died in 1939 on the way. This I know specifically. Next the twins. My sister Fryda and my brother Emanuel. Both were born in 1910. Bernard was probably two or three years older than them. Emanuel started to attend the gymnasium. Fryda was the same age as him, so she probably also began going to school. Emanuel served five years in prison because of his opinions. Fryda probably died when the Germans entered

Przemysl. In 1941, 1942 I suppose, something like that. Emanuel died after the war in 1951 in the Dzierzynski Antituberculous Sanitarium in Otwock. His grave is at the Jewish cemetery in Cracow. Next there was Eugenia. A very nice, beautiful girl. She was always regarded as very attractive. Genia spent the entire occupation in Poland. She went through survived both occupations. She probably wasn't in the ghetto. Genia died in Cracow in 1945. In June or July, something like that. There was one more sister, Minka, Mina. Born in 1912 or 1913. Minka was a nurse. She died probably in 1940, something like that.

My siblings were educated differently. My eldest brother went up to a Polish gymnasium. I've got a photo of him dressed in that gymnasium uniform. He normally passed the high-school final exams, and I think he started to study law. At some state university, Polish, but I don't remember where exactly. Maybe in Lwow, because it's close to Przemysl. Minka for example completed a co-educational school in Przemysl. Apparently, I suppose, Father could still afford it then. Later it was recession, family status did not allow to achieve that luxury.

Our home was very progressive, with a fully formed outlook upon life, of left-wing opinions, right, and this often caused trouble for the whole family. Only the Polish language was used at home. Except my father, who knew Hebrew and Yiddish perfectly, I have no doubts, none of my brothers spoke these languages. Maybe the older brothers knew some because they went through all the periods necessary for that cheder, grammar school, gymnasium. Probably, I don't know that for certain, my parents also spoke Yiddish. Somewhere, it came to my ears. I really doubt other homes knew Polish and used it to such an extent as it was at the home in which I was born.

At home we would read lay books, belles-lettres, all contemporary writers. And everyone knew them. Boys and girls lived to read. It was normal. Nowadays it is a special virtue, but back then nobody could imagine otherwise. My brother Bernard used to eat his dinner with a spoon and read. There was also foreign and Polish press, that was a rarity not everyone could put their hands on it. It was delivered by order. For example 'Inprekor', about the world upper class, criticizing mutual relations between people, right, in different countries. Kind of left-wing. Uncles used to come to us and often read it.

Tradition was present all the time regardless of the home being progressive. During those early years, holidays were legalized observed. Obviously, all holidays, Easter time, when you don't eat bread, only those matzot, right, and so on. Mostly on Saturdays Father used to go for prayers. He really abode by it during holidays, but he never forced us to celebrate it. Such a custom it was and that's it. I don't know, but it was applied probably because of religious reasons. I don't remember if anyone deviated in these matters When my parents could afford it, there was that traditional fish, too. There was also a crisis time, when there were no such fancy dishes. We just couldn't afford it. Mostly because of those reasons I don't have such recollections.