

Liya Kaplan



This is me at the award ceremony for 'the best pageant costume', at the Haapsala resort, on the coast of the Baltic Sea in Estonia in 1939. At the age of seven I entered the Ivrit school, where my elder siblings went. Apart from Ivrit, we studied German, French and English. The school was secular, but we studied religion, history and Jewish tradition. There were wonderful Jewish festivals in school. Children gave concerts; parents were invited and they were very grateful. I was rather musical. When I went to school, I dreamed that I had a small Italian accordion. I considered it to be a luxury. Besides, I was a proud girl and didn't want to ask my father for money to buy one. I gave classes to younger kids at school and was paid for that. I didn't squander money on anything and eventually saved enough to buy an accordion. Of course, it was the most precious thing I owned. We were members of youth Zionist organizations at school. I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair, my friend joined Betar. There was no animosity among us. When in 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany, the spirit of hatred towards Jews started penetrating Estonia. All of us felt the anti-Semitism. At that time we didn't understand the scale of it. There were short articles in the press, without details and comments. We learned about those events from the radio and papers, but no details were provided. We had wirelasses and could listen to any radio station of the world. Thus, we found out about the atrocities the fascists in Germany were committing and about the concentration camps. In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed and the first Soviet military bases were established. Soviet troops came. In 1940, the communists came to power with the help of Soviet troops. There were demonstrations of the workers, accompanied by Soviet tanks. The government resigned and the parliament was dissolved and preterm elections were announced. The communists won the elections by a majority vote. The Estonian Soviet Republic was established right away and Soviet Estonia officially became one of the Soviet republics. We immediately felt that a new regime had come to power. The military came and told us to vacate our apartment within two days. Our house was nationalized; it was needed by the Soviet regime, who decided to make a hospital there. We, the former bourgeois, had to leave there at once. My father found a small house in a beautiful suburb of Tallinn, called Nõmme, so we moved there. Father's store was confiscated.