

Mikhail Leger And His Friends



This is me, Mikhail Leger (standing on the left) and my friends in a recreation center. This photo was taken in Mogilyov-Podolskiy in 1949.

In July 1941 Germans established a Jewish ghetto in the center of the Mogilyov- Podolskiy. 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.

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. 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.

In April 1943 classes at school began. Mama sent me to the 2nd form. Two months later summer vacations began at school. Since I missed the first form at school, I had to take few exams in autumn. I studied in summer and passed my exams successfully. I went to the 3rd form. There were many Jewish children in my class. There was no anti-Semitism at school. There were Jews among teachers and the majority of school children were Jewish.

There was famine in 1947. I was 12 and remember the feeling of hunger. I couldn't stop thinking about food. All thoughts about food. In summer we broke into gardens eating unripe apples, apricots and pears. There were cards to receive bread every other day. It was hard to keep a

portion of bread till the next day. Mama was taking the bread away, but I found it and cut little pieces from it.

We celebrated Jewish holidays after the war and I took part in celebrations, even though I was a pioneer, and a Komsomol member. We were taught to be atheists at school. We knew there was no God and that religion was an opium for people. However, this was one thing, and my family traditions - another thing for me.

I studied well at school. I was particularly good at mathematics, physics and chemistry. I was not very good at social sciences, but I had good marks in them as well. We were raised patriots at school. I became a pioneer in the 4th form. I joined Komsomol at the age of 14. Since I was the youngest of my classmates, they joined Komsomol long before I did and I was desperately jealous about them being Komsomol members. I was very serious about getting prepared to admission to Komsomol: I read Lenin's works, and was aware of all political events in the USSR and abroad. I was very proud to show my Komsomol membership card to my parents, when I obtained it.