

Yelizaveta Zatkovetskaya



This is me, Yelizaveta Zatkovetskaya, I am six months old. This photo was made in Sagaydak, in 1917 when a visiting photographer arrived there. This was my first photograph.

My parents had a traditional wedding under a chuppah at the synagogue in 1916, my father was recruited to the army during WWI. My mother was pregnant with me. I was born on the 2nd day of Chanukkah in December 1916. My mother had mastitis that resulted in blood poisoning. She died in winter 1917 when I was one and a half months old. My grandmother Etah was looking after my mother, when she was ill. When my mother was dying, she took grandmother Etah's hand and asked her to name me Yelizaveta after her mother. Besides, my mother made grandmother Etah promise that she would never allow me to be raised by a stepmother. My mother said that my father would get married. He was young and handsome, she said, and asked my grandmother to raise me in her house. Grandmother Etah became my mother from then on, and I called her 'Mama' till the last days of her life. My grandmother's neighbor Sarrah Nikitina, who also had a baby, gave my grandmother her breast milk once a day and I also had cow milk.

About 1919 my father returned from the war. He came to live with us. He loved me dearly and my first memories are associated with him. He spent all his leisure time after working hard as He played with me, carried me around and made plain toys for me: straw and cloth dolls. The first years of my childhood passed in the atmosphere of love and care. Everybody loved me: grandmother Etah, who gave me the most delicious food, though the family was poor, grandfather Benyum, who always told me interesting stories about Jews before bedtime, and my father's sisters and brothers. Uncle Motl, who was young away from him hiding under the table and he caught me,

held me in his hands and kissed. When I was asleep by the time he returned from his outings, he ran over grandmother (I slept with my grandmother) to kiss me. My aunts Manya and Yelizaveta always argued about whose turn it was to bathe me and comb my hair. They loved me so dearly that they enjoyed taking care of me. My father's younger sister Yelizaveta loved me the most. During pogroms, when gangs broke into Sagaydak, Yelizaveta grabbed me telling them I was her daughter. Bandits used to rape young girls, but they didn't touch those who were married and had children. Pogroms stayed in my memory as one of my first childhood memories. I remember that my father's brother Duvid was ill, when a pogrom began, and my father took him to the attic fearing that bandits might kill him. Then my father grabbed me and ran into a field where we were hiding in high sunflower plants. I remember that I was thirsty, and he went to pick a watermelon in the adjoining field and there bandits captured him. My father begged them to allow him take me from the field or I would get lost in the field of sunflowers that were 3 times higher than me. They ordered him to take off his boots, and made him run across the fields holding me to the village. At home bandits turned our wardrobes upside down looking for good clothes, but we were poor and there was nothing to take. My father often hid me and other children in a haystack during pogroms and at times we spent few days there. My father brought us water and food and ordered to be quiet. I remember some military staying in our house. They made my grandfather unharness horses, water and feed their horses and told grandmother to bake bread for them. I have this vivid picture before: my grandmother Etah kneading dough in a big kneading trough with her sleeves rolled up, and tears falling from her eyes into the trough.

Those were horrifying years. When pogroms were over, another disaster began: famine in the early 1920s. I was almost 5 years old, and I remember well the feeling of hunger. Our neighbor, my wet nurse, whose family was a little better off than ours, brought us potato peels, and my grandmother made Saturday challah bread with them. Our family was very religious, and celebrated Sabbath even in those hard years.