

Haya Benisevich



This is document picture of my maternal grandmother Haya Benisevich. The picture was made in Jonava in the 1900s.

My ancestors are from a small Lithuanian town Jonava, located about 20 kilometers away from Kaunas. Jonava was very small, consisting of several streets. The population of town was mostly Jewish (editor's note: in the 1930s there were about 10 thousand Jews in Jonava). They mostly lived in the downtown area. There were their shops as well- grocery stores, cobbler and tailor shops. There were great carpenters in Jonava. Jonava cabinet-makers was famous all over Lithuania. Jews owned a small furniture mill. There was a match production workshop, where waste materials from furniture were used. There was square Liberty in the heart of the town. There were two big two-storied stone synagogues by the square. Apart Jews there were also Russians, mostly Old Believers who appeared in Jonava in the seventeenth century. Old believers lived in the suburbs. They mostly were farmers- tilled the land and bred cattle. They brought dairy products, potatoes and other vegetables in town. Poles and Lithuanians also lived in town, but there were not many of them. Both my paternal and maternal grandparents were cabmen.

My mother Riva Benisevich was my father's cousin. At that time incestuous unions were rather common. Maternal grandmother Haya was grandmother Shifra's sister. My maternal grandfather Alter Benisevich was born in 1870s. At that time cabmen considered to be the lowest class in the conventional hierarchy of craftsmen. Grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya were illiterate, but very religious. I remember Alter very well. He was a tall sinewy man. He seemed old to me though in the 1930s he was not more than sixty. He had a long beard and wore a cap or a hat.

Grandmothers Haya and Shifra wore head kerchiefs. I had never seen them with their heads uncovered. They wore long dark dresses even in summer.

My mother had two sisters. Children in grandfather Alter's family were not educated either. The three daughters, had helped grandmother Haya about the house since early childhood. Grandfather needed a hand as well. In summer it was necessary to procure the forage for the horses. My mother and sisters mowed hay.

Our family lived in a large house with mother's parents. It was not our place, we rented two large apartments. Our rooms were to the right from the entrance and grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya lived to the left from us. The landlord of the house was old believer Aleksandrov. Our family occupied two rooms. We, boys, slept in one of them. We had good wooden beds. The youngest Gershko slept in a cradle in the parents' bedroom - it was a lighter and cozier room. There was a round table in the middle of the room. There was also a leathern couch, small bookcase with few books. There was nobody to read them as parents were illiterate. Grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya occupied two smaller rooms. One of them was a drawing-room and another narrow one like a pencil - box was their bedroom. The most spacious was the kitchen of 50 square meters. There was a large Russian stove and tables there. There was a large round table in the middle of the kitchen. The whole family dined there on Sabbath and holidays. We marked all Jewish holidays. Usually the whole family including grandfather Alter with grandmother Haya, aunt Leya with her family and aunt Vera got together in our large kitchen.

There was an orchard in front of the house. There were fruit trees, chestnuts, black currant and gooseberry bushes. The stables of my father and grandfather Alter were in the heart of the orchard. There were five big dray horses in the stables. Grandfather owned three of them.