

Igor Lerner's Mother With Her Friends And Neighbors



This photograph taken in 1939 in Odessa region shows my Mom among her friends and neighbors. In 1939 we already lived in Olgino, but Mom often visited her birthplace and spent vacations there. In connection with it, I'll tell you about my childhood.

Both families of my parents lived in Krivoe Ozero village of Odessa region. My grandmothers lived in their own houses and managed a household. Their houses were typical Ukrainian huts. [Ukrainian hut is a house made from clay or wood covered with clay, it is usually thatched with straw.] Grandmothers kept cows, a lot of hens, had large vegetable gardens. So they worked without a break since morning till late at night, because they had to produce foodstuff for themselves and also to help our family with food. Leye, my maternal grandmother was very religious and brought her daughter (my Mom) up on the same lines. Grandmother always visited synagogue in Pervomaisk and in Uman. My paternal grandmother Haya was thriftier and much less religious. Leye was more kind than Haya: her relations with grandchildren were much better than Haya's. Some time Haya lived at our place, and they not always reached mutual understanding with my Mom. You know that a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law are seldom in tune with each other. But Daddy was very wise: he always managed to smooth away conflicts.

Both my grandmothers died in Ukraine during starvation of 1932. [In 1932 the authorities in many instances exacted such high levels of procurements that starvation was widespread. In some places, famine was allowed to run its course; and millions of peasants in Ukraine starved to death in a famine, called the Holodomor in Ukrainian. An estimated 3-6 million people died in this horrible manmade famine.] In the heat of famine we lived already in Leningrad, we got to know about events in Ukraine from rumors. We sent grandmothers food packages, but later we found out that they had not received any.

Our village in Ukraine was large. There was a beautiful small river (I do not remember its name). For the most part my memoirs refer to 1939 when we arrived there already from Leningrad. It was

then when I saw straight streets with ruinous huts: almost all population of the village died out during famine of 1932.

My parents lived in the former priest's house. It was the only house in the village with iron roof. My parents had got a large vegetable garden. It was necessary for the family: vegetables helped to survive all the year round.

It was Mom who kept the house. Besides the vegetable garden, we had an orchard with big plum and apricot trees. I remember the sound of ripe apricots falling down upon the roof of our house...

We kept a cow, a calf, a lot of hens. We also kept pigs, but only for sale. Mom managed not only to keep the house, but also to help father at the shop. Regarding assistants, we had only a nurse: she was invited when the 3rd child (me) was born. That nurse sewed a toy dog for me (using a sheepskin) and called it Bobik. It was the only toy I had at that time; therefore I remember it till now (80 years passed!).

We did no electricity supply and used kerosene lamps. In the house there was a large stove of Russian style. There was no water supply, too. But in the yard there was a deep well with cold and tasty water. The cellar under the house seemed to me very deep. Each time I got there I considered a real adventure. We cellared food there (it must last us the winter). I remember huge bright pumpkins (they remained fresh very long). Mom cooked very well and taught me to cook. She also taught my wife to cook traditional Jewish courses.

At home we celebrated all Jewish holidays. We observed strict kashrut.

In our village there was a school, and a teacher of the primary school rented a room in our house. When I was 6 years old, she noticed that I read very well and suggested to send me to school. That was the way I became a schoolboy a year earlier than it was necessary. At school they taught us in Ukrainian language (at that time I did not know that there were other languages except Yiddish and Ukrainian). Later at Leningrad school children laughed at me when I spoke Ukrainian. So in our village I finished the first grade and my brothers finished primary school.