

Shlema Kuyavskiy



This is my father Shlema Kuyavskiy. The picture was made in Lodz in 1910s before parents' wedding - they went to the photo salon to have the pictures made for each other. My brothers, the fugitives to the USSR, kept that picture. They even managed to have kept it in the exile to Siberia. Recently they gave the photo to me.

My name is Meer Kuyavskis. I was born in a large Polish city Lodz [about 130 km from Warsaw], nee Kuyavskiy. Lodz was then the second largest city in Poland, its industrial and commercial center. Before Second World War its Jewish community was considered to be the second largest in Europe after Warsaw community. It numbered 300 thousand Jews. There were a lot of synagogues in the city, as well as Jewish schools, cheders, Jewish hospitals. There was a fully-fledged Jewish life. As a rule, Jews dealt with commerce- from small-scale up to a large-scale. There were a lot of Jewish stores in our and adjacent blocks. Small grocery stores were in almost every house.

My father's parents lived close by, but I did not see them very often. I do not remember my grandparents treat me very tenderly, give me a hug or a kiss. It was not only with me- at that time it was common to bring up children very strictly and it was very hard to get grandmother's fondling. My father's parents were born in Lodz in the 1860s. My grandfather's name was Fishel Kuyavskiy. I cannot recall my grandmother's name. She died in 1930, when I was a baby. I just remember that she looked like a lean, petite old lady. She always wore a wig, dark skirt and blouse. Grandpa Fishel also resembled most of elderly Jews- the denizens of our street- not tall, humpty old man with a hat. I remember that grandparents' had a one-room apartment with a small corridor where grandmother cooked food. I think that grandfather was a craftsman, not a rich one to boot, barely scraping through. When he grew old (at that time 60-year old was considered an old man), grandpa was afflicted with cataract. He was almost blind, and all he could do was pray day in, day

out. He often held his prayer book upside down being mocked by his numerous grandchildren.

Grandfather had many children, but by the time when I started perceiving my surroundings, there were not many of them- some of them died. Others left for America and Canada looking for better life. I only remember father's brother and sister. Father's brother Shmuel Kuyavskiy, who was about two years older than he, owned a grocery store in Lodz. He was a well-heeled man and did not think much about us as we were his poor relatives. We were not trying to impose ourselves. Everybody had his own life. I saw his wife and daughters couple of times. I do not remember their names.

My family got in touch with father's sister Chava more than with Shmuel. Her husband died long before the outbreak of war and Chava lived close by with her daughter Edya. Chava died in ghetto during occupation and Edya managed to survive it. When Great Patriotic War was over she happened to be in Canada, where she married an American Jew. She is still alive and healthy.

My father Shlema Kuyavskiy was born in Lodz in 1884. He went to cheder in his childhood as it was customary for the families of righteous Jews. He did not go on with his education. He learnt the rudiments of reading and writing, which was enough to run his business.

Father had a rather stable business. There was a workshop at home, where six women worked under father's supervision. Mother was in charge of them. They sewed quilts for sale. The quilts were given to the store, which paid us money when they were sold. It was a rather stable income, though it was not very big. It was the so-called family business, ran by parents. I do not know what my father did for a living before getting married. As I said our family had a strict morale, so I even did not think of asking father about his previous life.