

Vladimir Slopak's Family At Hanukkah



My family on a Hanukkah celebration in our home in Odessa in 1949. From right to left, sitting are my grandfather Idel Portnoy and my cousin Ilia, my grandfather's cousin Syunia and my cousin Lyusia and my mother's cousin Rebeka Khaseleva. From right to left standing are my aunt Sopha Shneiderman, our neighbor Nyusia, my aunt Fira Shneider, I, my mother Anna Slopak and my mother's cousin Heiva.

My maternal grandfather Idel Portnoy was born in Odessa in 1882. He studied in cheder. He learned to read in Russian and Yiddish by himself. He could speak Russian and needed to learn only the Russian alphabet. Yiddish was his mother tongue and he could read Yiddish texts because he learned the Hebrew alphabet in the cheder. He worked as a butcher assistant at first and later having saved some money he got a little butcher's store at New Market. In the early 1930s he became a carpenter in a furniture working-shop. My grandfather made a desk and a chair for me as a birthday present.

He was a religious man. He went to synagogue on Saturday and the holidays. He always wore a cap going to the synagogue. In summer, when it was too hot, he covered his head with a handkerchief, tied in knots on four sides. He read the Torah at home in the evening when he was free. He prayed at home three times a day. They followed the kashrut in his family. Before Pesach the house was thoroughly cleaned. They bought matzah in the synagogue and made Gefilte fish. There were many dishes made from matzah in our family. They were pastries, cookies, puddings and cakes. Elder children and adults fasted at Yom Kippur. Grandfather Idel always prayed for his children and grandchildren at home. They were a religious family, but they couldn't manifest their religiosity during the Soviet regime. Churches and synagogue were closed during that period and clergymen and rabbis were persecuted, arrested and many of them were executed. However, the family always tried to observe Jewish traditions when possible.

My grandparents lived in Meschanskaya Street in Moldavanka. It was a Jewish neighborhood and they socialized with Jews mostly. In 1924 they moved to Grecheskaya Street in the center of the town. Their new apartment was in an old two-storied building one block away from the central Deribassovskaya Street in Odessa. There were Russian, Ukrainian and Jewish tenants in their building. They had a two-room apartment with very high ceilings on the 2nd floor. I grew up in this apartment. My grandfather lived in this apartment after the war with his daughters.

In 1957 my grandfather Idel died. Our grandfather was lying on the floor wrapped in white sheets. There were candles on the floor and his daughters were wearing torn black clothes. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery according to the Jewish tradition.