

Zofie Fantlova



This is my maternal grandmother, Zofie Fantlova. The photo was taken in the Atelier Benda in Prague in the 1920s.

My grandmother was a real Prague native. Her mother ran a little liquor store, I don't know anything about her father, and she likely didn't have any siblings. She was born on 26th April 1873. Her mother tongue was Czech, and she was an immensely lively, vital and warm-hearted person. She was always waving her hands about, calling out, hugging and I don't know what else. She was always asking questions, everything interested her, she wanted to know everything. In the shop my grandmother reigned behind the till, and Grandpa 'officiated' in the back in the 'comptoir'.

During Grandpa's lifetime she most certainly observed certain habits, women however traditionally don't pray as much as men, they don't have time for it, when they have to take care of the household while the men are off somewhere philosophizing and arguing about the meaning of this or that biblical passage, they aren't even allowed in the prayer hall, they're only allowed into places specified for them. While men from times immemorial have learned Hebrew so that they could read holy books and discuss them, their wives remained illiterate probably until the institution of compulsory schooling. So I didn't encounter my grandmother's religiosity until after the war. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, she spent time from morning to the late afternoon hours in the Jubilee Synagogue, that's the one on Jeruzalemska Street, the whole day she'd fast in accordance with religious decrees. With Jews that means not only not eating, but also not drinking. Aunt Oly was concerned that at her age she could faint on the way home as a result of this, and so I'd come for her before the end of the services, I'd wait in front of the synagogue and accompany her home.

My grandmother was a fighter with immense energy, who wasn't one to give up just like that. At the age of 72, in Terezin, she fell ill with typhoid fever, I don't understand how in those conditions she managed to survive typhus and live to see the end of the war there. She wouldn't have survived Auschwitz.

When I returned from England after the war, I went to Aunt Oly's place. I rang at my aunt's door, a tiny old woman came to open up, I said good day, and asked if Mrs. Dvorakova was home, the old lady said that she had gone shopping, that she'd be back soon, and then I and Grandma recognized each other at the same time, and hugged. Grandma took me into the room, we sat down and Grandma began crying, with joy and pain at the same time. And then she only repeated, and this very often until her death 'Why didn't I die instead?' From that time I know that for a woman there is no greater pain than the death of a child.

The close of her life wasn't easy either. The last two years she lived in a Jewish old folk's home, she certainly wasn't happy there, that was clear to me when I used to come visit her. Back then old age homes looked a little different from today's retirement homes and because she didn't have anything to occupy her, her head was beset with probably very sad memories of dead children. The day that Grandma was dying, my aunts and I visited her in the hospital. She was in a morphine-induced delirium, didn't recognize us, and just repeated 'Gretinko'. That's how she addressed her daughter, my mother.